

Five Questions about the Mind

Extract taken from 'The Happy Twins: Dzogchen and Mahamudra'¹

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1. Does the mind come from anywhere?
2. Does the mind stay anywhere?
3. Does the mind go anywhere?
4. Does the mind have any shape and colour?
5. Does the mind have any size or dimension?

Does the mind come from anywhere?

Until you become clear, every time you do your Three Aa practice please go back to these five questions and keep enquiring until you get some sense that because mind has no limit, everything is in the mind. We are using these questions to bring us into closeness with the mind... so that we have more sense of it. The questions are not a problem to be solved; They are not trick exam questions.

¹ Two texts were studied on this retreat. The Mirror of Luminous Revelation (from Nuden Dorje Drophan Lingpa) and The Mahamudra Middle Way of the Ganges (from Tilopa).

They are just a way of easing yourself into a different relation with the mind because usually we have no notion of our mind. We have notions about the content of the mind, about thoughts, memories, sensations, and feelings. That is what we are concerned with. We know what is coming in and through the mind however now we are concerned with the mind itself. We have a mind so this practice is about getting to know it.

Once again, don't sit for long with these questions because the longer you sit with them the more likely you are to get entangled in thoughts about thoughts. The presence of the mind is undeniable, but how it is – that is our issue. At the beginning it is good to open in the practice and sit with the question for five minutes then take a little break and go back into it.

Where does the mind rest?

In the middle period, where does it rest? Our mind presumably is not in Australia or America. Our mind is here, so where does it rest or stay or dwell? Is it inside my body? Is it outside my body? Is it in my head or in my brain or in my feet? Where is this mind? Stay close to it.

What are thoughts? I can think about my hand. I can look at the back of my hand and the palm of my hand, or I can think about what time it is. We have a sense of what a thought is: it is a temporary resident in the space of the mind which organises certain patterns of cognition and interpretation. Feelings have a similar function, and so in a sense, do sensations. What we call thoughts, feelings and sensations are formative patterns which don't endure for long. When we are looking for the mind it is important not to confuse the mind with a thought.

A lot has been written in buddhism about the mind (*sem* [Tib. Sems]) and the content of the mind (*sem-jung* [Tib. Sems Byung]). When you are thinking, where does the mind stay? Lots of answers to this question arise. What is that answer? Is it a thought? What is the relation of a thought to the mind? The thought comes from the mind. Babies come out of mummies. The mummy was there before the baby. Does the baby know about mummy? Mummy knows about baby. Mummy sees more than baby. The thought is 'baby', the sensation is 'baby', the memory is 'baby'.

The Padmasambhava Practice that we do ends with a prayer encouraging us to awaken to impermanence. It says, *"I will lovingly befriend the good house of sunyata. With this, mother actuality and her child will quickly meet."* This is exactly this. The mother dharmata is the space of the arising of phenomena, which is the mind itself. The child is the thought, what is emerging. "May they quickly meet" means may they not be held separate. You don't have children without a mother. The mother may have died in childbirth but the child still has a mother. What this means is that there are no freely self-existing phenomena; there are no entities. We have a mother and we belong in a lineage of progression of manifestation. Thoughts have a mother and that mother is the mind.

We are looking for mum. We are not looking for children.

Advice concerning the mind questions

These questions are very good friends for yogis. These are our main companions because they really help us to see when we are getting lost – when we merge in the content of the mind and delude ourselves into believing that this is the mind itself. We come back to them again and again. They support us just to stay with what is there.

If you take up these questions they will be more helpful to you than anything else in your dharma practice because this is about the base. People have a question: What is the base? We hear about this again and again. We know that this building has foundations. We see that in this room there are pillars that go into the foundations and because they have a solid base they can carry the weight of the storeys up above. The base is what things are resting on, but the base can also be the source; it can be what things emerge from.

So what is it? It is here. We just have to find it. How do we find it? By letting it show itself. You find it by not seeking to find. Other texts tell us not to actively look for the mind. You can't find it. It's not something to find or to lose. You can't buy it or make it, it is already here, but you have to put yourself in the way of it revealing itself. In the past I have used the example of a rare bird that has come into the forest. You go into the forest hoping to see it. You sit somewhere very quietly, and you wait. If you run around in the forest you are not going to see the bird. The bird is in the forest and if you wait long enough you will be able to see the bird. It is exactly like that with the mind.

In a sense, the purpose of this practice is to show the impotence of the ego. The ego can do many things. The ego can tell you when you have to pay your taxes. The ego can help you maintain your job or a relationship, but the ego can't find the mind. And that is why we are doing this Three Aa Guru Yoga before we go into the actual practice – to ease ourselves out of our ego formation. Because if you sit in the ego and you think you are an intelligent person who knows how to do lots of things and you bring all these resources, the bird will fly away. You will never see the bird.

We don't need any of these resources because the potency of the ego is turned towards the world of things and experiences – making things happen, correcting things and so on. The ego is the site of entry into participation in the world of duality. We are concerned here with awareness, or mind, which in this context are synonymous. This is the revealer.

How do I come close to the revealer? Can the revealer be revealed if the revealer is an object? We look around the room and we see different things. We see people, shapes and colours; there are things to be seen. You walk outside and you see the leaves. We are used to having revelation – something revealed to us – the revealer is our mind. How do I find myself in the place of the revealer?

Hopefully this helps you to get a sense of how you have to position yourself, because if you turn your mind into an object, firstly, who is looking for the mind, and secondly, is the mind an object?

So the question is, where does the mind stay? If we find it's not located anywhere and it hasn't come from anywhere, then it is not an object. If you are looking for the mind as an object and the mind is not an object, you are going to have some problems. What you will find is lots of thoughts. The mind is very happy to distract you with thoughts.

This is like the story in the Ramayana when Ram goes off into the forest with Lakshman. A hoard of demons arrives and they catch Ram's wife, Sita, and they want to rape her. They start pulling at her sari to strip her naked, but one sari extends into another and another... The demons are left holding this whole mountain of cloth and yet Sita is still covered in cloth. If you want to rape your mind, you are going to get a mountain of thoughts; you will never get to the naked mind itself. If you want someone to take their clothes off, you have to be sweet, like a warm wind not like a big storm. It's not so complicated, so be very gentle with your own mind.

Does the mind go somewhere?

Where does the mind go? Does our mind ever vanish? Does awareness vanish? Now clearly our being conscious of our mind, even having any notion that we have a mind, vanishes. When you are very busy and caught up in something you are not thinking that you have a mind and that your mind is doing this or that, because you are focussed on the activity. For example, let's say you have a bicycle and the chain comes off the bike, you are trying to put it back on without getting too much oil on your fingers. There is a kind of connectivity however this is illuminated. Your mind is there. The fact that you are not aware of your mind doesn't mean that the mind is not there.

So does the mind vanish? Does it go away? Everything in this is impermanent. The Buddha said this many times: All compounded things – all samskaras – are impermanent. Whatever is put together as a composite from various causes will fall apart. Everything in this room will fall apart in time. This building will also fall apart in time. The rocks and mountains fall apart. You can go to different parts of the country and you can see where there have been glaciers – how the hills are rounded and there are big stones that were pushed along by glaciers. Everything can be churned up because it had a beginning, a middle, and then it has an end.

Does the mind have a beginning?

Does it come from someplace? Does it have a middle where it stays and abides as something, or does it go? Everything else is like that. This is the central issue: is the mind just another thing? Is it

another special form of everything else or is it other with a big 'O' – radically Other than everything I know, Otherwise than knowledge?

Some of us say this phrase again and again, "*Ma Sam Jo Me She Rab Pha Rol Chin...*" *'Transcendental wise discerning, beyond speech, thought or expression is unborn and unceasing...'* That is to say, it's not like anything else. We can talk about wild flowers or the health of the trees. We can talk about how far it is to the nearest supermarket. We can talk about all of these things, but wisdom which sees emptiness can't be talked about because it is not a thing. We don't want to have this as just another form of special concept. That would be useless because, as a concept about our mind, it will fade in time. We all come here and we talk about this a lot, and after a couple of days we all leave and are back in our life. Other patterns of thought arise and this just vanishes.

Tibetans say that as long as it remains on a conceptual level, it is like a patch on clothes. The patch is stitched on to your clothes but it is not an integral part of the cloth, and so it can come off.

It is how to find the unborn intrinsic awareness which is always present. Now we are going to look – does the mind go someplace?

Does the mind have any shape or colour?

This question is usually formulated as 'What shape or colour or size does the mind have?' but here Nuden Dorje brings the two questions together. We will separate these two.

Again, these five questions are questions which illuminate all phenomena. Let's say we have a thought about the universe. You might see a movie or go to a planetarium or look at pictures in a book, and think, 'Wow! The universe is so enormous and beyond that are the planets!' That is a set of concepts; a set of ideas, images and pictures. You can see how big your mind seems to be with that. Whether you can encapsulate it or feel it is beyond encapsulation, you are still giving it a kind of shape.

We have the notion that things have a shape. Everything in the room has a shape. Trees have a shape. Everything has shape and colour. The contents of the body have shape and colour. All phenomena fit inside these five questions and they help to determine the nature of phenomena. The basic question here is whether the mind is a phenomenon? Is it something which presents?

Even if we think of a noumenon – the more nebulous ungraspable sibling of phenomenon – we can conceptualise that in some way. You can have a numinous mystical experience: something on the very edge of consciousness that seems to have some kind of formation. You can look in books and find drawings of fairies and images of all kind of creatures. All the tantric deities have shape and colour. Although we don't meet them in the street they have arisen in somebody's vision and they are taken as being helpful adjuncts to meditation. Do they exist or not? They are appearance and

emptiness – *nang-tong* [Tib. sNang sTong]. If they appear they have a shape. Let's say you asked an artist to paint Green Tara for you but then when you go to collect it, Tara is white. You might say "Hey, that's the wrong Tara. I wanted the green one because Green Tara is green, and White Tara is white. Please take it back and do it again." Shape and colour is everywhere.

So now we apply these examinations to the mind.

Does the mind have a size or dimension?

The fifth aspect we are questioning is 'Does the mind have a dimension or a size?' Is it small? Is it something inside us? Is it big? Is it something outside of us? Does it include us? Are we on the outside of our mind?

This is very important because a lot of people believe that their mind is in their brain, or that the mind is created from the brain, or that the mind is some kind of qualia system. That is one view and if you have trained in hard science you'll know a lot about the brain and the different parts of the brain and how they function. You can inspect that. What are you inspecting? Hard facts. How hard are they? They seem to be going through your mind quite quickly. Hard facts are thoughts, and thoughts are vanishing. Hard facts are beliefs. Investigate it for yourself. Believing what anyone else says is a waste of time in this business. It is your own direct experience that is required: where you see, 'It is like this', and when you see what you see, you can't say.

The texts tell us that if we think we can say it we haven't seen it. If we have come to a conclusion, can sum it up and feel that we know what we're talking about, then we are going in the wrong direction. That doesn't mean there is nothing at all. It is not a fantasy construction. It is whatever it is; it is direct, it is immediate. The texts are always talking about immediate, infinite, unbounded, naked, fresh. It is here. How? As what? As anything? Is it big or is it small? Is it inside you or is it outside you?

Sitting here we might hear a rumble and think it's a plane. Is the plane outside our mind or inside our mind? When we hear the church bells are they coming from outside? The vibration comes through the air into our ear and then our brain tells us that it's the church bells. That is a sequence of interpretations. Is your mind other than interpretation? Is it just one thought among many?

We may have heard that the difference between buddhas and sentient beings is that the buddhas live in the clarity whereas we live opaque, shaded and veiled through our own interpretations. We are always trying to work things out. Why? Because we don't see – we imagine. When you are thinking about how your mind is you are imagining all the possibilities of how it could be. There is no end to thinking. You can have this kind of thought and that kind of thought.

If you have studied western philosophy you will have come across many different theories about the mind. There are huge amounts of study about consciousness nowadays. There are conferences with many many delegates and endless publications. Students get their PhDs on thoughts about thoughts about thoughts, about the mind. This is a lot of stuff.

So what is the mind? You have a mind; your mind is the basis of you. Everything you experience is because you have got a mind which is why it is called the ground or the base or the source. What arises in the mind are like the flowers and the grasses coming out of the ground. Without the ground you wouldn't have the grass and the flowers and the trees. When you walk outside you see the trees and the bushes and the grass and the flowers. We are lucky because we live in a nice country with a lot of rain and that is why we have a lot of grass. When you have such a lot of grass you don't even see the ground. You are all intelligent educated people. The rain of knowledge has been showering on you for a long time. The grass of thoughts has arisen like a jungle in your mind, but you have a blunt machete. Where is the ground? "But I only see the trees. Look at all these lovely flowers. They are so amazing and so interesting." We have a lot of plants growing but where is the ground? The ground is the mind – it is not thought.

So, once more let's sit and examine this question.

Consciousness raising through the five questions

This is a central and foundational practice. It is analogous in some ways to the way that Nagarjuna proceeds when explaining madhyamika, the philosophical view of emptiness. Of course, there he is creating a conceptual vision and this is a non-conceptual exploration. Nagarjuna adopts the *via negativa*. He is non-propositional: he is not setting out to assert anything about emptiness. He merely takes up the propositions put by other people and shows how they are false and groundless. His basic approach is to say, 'Not this, not that', 'Neti neti', 'It cannot be established', 'It is beyond establishment and yet it is undeniable.' This is in harmony with the Heart Sutra. Everything in buddhism has the same flavour, that of the middle way. There are not multiple buddhisms; there are multiple approaches but you can always tell if a view is authentic dharma because it will be harmonious with the other views and it won't be in opposition.

Nagarjuna said that the truth cannot be expressed, yet you can say, 'Not this'. When we look at the mind, our question is what size is the mind? Is it very big? When I am focussing my attention it is as if my mind is very small. When I am lying on a beach and feeling relaxed with the wind on my face and gazing at the sky it is as if my mind is very big. Sometimes the mind looks big and sometimes the mind looks small; sometimes it seems to have a shape, and sometimes it doesn't. These are appearances. It is not as it appears and yet to say it has no appearance at all would be a delusion, otherwise you wouldn't have any sense of the mind at all.

If the mind was just some eternal great mystery that had no connection with us we wouldn't be here. Clearly the mind is the ground of our manifesting, and emptiness and manifestation are inseparable. Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness. There are not two categories with emptiness over on one side and form on the other side, and that somehow we bring these two together. Non-duality means that from the very beginning form has not been other than emptiness. However when our gaze is clicked on to the form aspect it is as if the empty aspect is not there; it is only not there for us because we are not attending to it. When we start to attend to it again it becomes visible.

For example, in Freudian developmental theory small children are regarded as polymorphous perverse. That is to say, they experience some kind of erotic interest through all their various orifices and are quite interested in bodies generally. He wrote that this is followed by the latency phase, a phase where the erotic hardly impinges. Then around the time of puberty there is a revival of erotic interest and they become aware of bodies in a different way. The latency phase in samsara is form and emptiness, emptiness and form. We only see the form. The emptiness is always there. The erotic is always there. Bodies, as objects of interest, are always there, but when you are not in touch with the erotic you don't get it. In the same way, emptiness is always there but you don't tune into it; it doesn't speak to you. You only see the form. This is why there are so metaphors and images about seeing because when you have a partial vision you don't see.

Masters do not see servants, Hegel said, although servants observe masters very carefully. When I lived in India, sometimes in the houses of wealthy people, I noticed that wealthy see the servants except to complain about them. In the American South the condition of black people was invisible. White people did not see them, because they were black people. The criteria they used to evaluate other white people belonged in a different order from the criteria for evaluating black or Native American people.

The gaze is inflected and tilted to highlight certain features and not other features. You pay attention to the people of your own class who are 'proper people' and the servants hardly exist. Karl Marx talked about class consciousness and pointed out that people in one particular class band tend to be blind to the existence of people in other bands. It is what he described as mystification or false consciousness: it is there but you just don't get it.

Form is emptiness is a similar kind of internal confusion. We have experienced consciousness-raising around racism and the oppression of women and minority groups. Consciousness-raising means, 'Hey, you can't ignore this any longer. Look!' Gradually you start to stop ignoring it.

For example, when women in Britain eventually managed to train as doctors, they would often not be allowed into the doctors' staff room because it would just be for the men. There would often be no female toilets, and female doctors would have to use the patients' toilets. Doctors would have

their own toilets, but women were not considered to be proper doctors. Why? Because they were women. They had the same qualifications. Gradually, these contradictions are made more visible and people say, 'What? How can that be?' But before the light was shone on it the contradictions were there and invisible.

This is the same as the Heart Sutra. The Heart Sutra is saying emptiness is here and form is here. They are both together. Woman is not different from doctor, and doctor is not different from woman. 'How can that be? Women... come on... we know what women are like. They cannot be real doctors.' But that is what consciousness-raising is, and that is what we are doing here.

When you sit in an assumption you have a prefabricated idea system, and you live inside it in a sealed bubble. When we sit with these five questions we are trying to allow ourselves to come into proximity so that the nature of the bubble can be revealed. We start to see, 'Oh, there is a mind. I thought the mind was only the content of the mind. I thought there was just thoughts and feelings and my memories and this is me.' The self is the organising point around which all the content of the mind – memories, feelings and sensations – organise in such a way that the mind is never awakened to.

What we are doing with these five questions is easing ourselves out of that habitual familiar orientation so that we start to get close to 'Oh, there is mind. Try to spend a lot of time with these five questions until the mind becomes you, until you realise that 'I am experience arising in the mind, and the mind is my ground. I am the luminosity of the mind.'

In order to get there these five questions are very helpful.