

ADYASHANTI

the  
most  
important  
thing

DISCOVERING  
TRUTH AT  
THE HEART  
OF LIFE



sounds true  
BOULDER, COLORADO



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# The Power of a Good Question

YOU MUST BE WILLING TO GO AGAINST THE GRAIN,  
AGAINST CONSENSUS REALITY.

Here's a wonderful quote that I came upon by the nineteenth-century French writer Pierre-Marc-Gaston de Lévis: "It is easier to judge the mind of a man by his questions rather than his answers." I love this kind of thinking because it turns our way of looking at things upside down. We are oriented to what I call "consensus reality"—what most people agree upon—but finding the most important thing depends on not accepting the ideas, beliefs, and opinions of others, because the way most people go about life does not always lead to great depth, joy, inspiration, or peace.

The questions that we ask are so incredibly important. *What is the most important thing in my spiritual life? What is my entire spiritual life oriented around?* You could apply this line of questioning to your relationships. *What is my friendship or romance all about? What is the most important thing about that person to me?* Or the subject of your investigation could be work. *What is the most important thing about my livelihood?* Because we are accessing our depth with these kinds of questions, it is not always an easy or comfortable process. You must be willing to go against the grain, against consensus reality, and against what everybody thinks is the true and correct answer.

As Lévis suggested, the answers are not as important as the questions—but our conditioning is around answers. When we are in school and it comes time to take a test, we want to get the right answer; we want to regurgitate what we were taught. That is what is expected, and it is part of learning. Unfortunately, at least to my thinking, it is too big a part of education, because we are taught to fill ourselves with other people’s answers and not to find our own. Some of this is the result of practical necessity—memorizing certain answers helps us to learn how to read, do math, and understand the sciences. But when it comes to our lives, to our sense of happiness and well-being and love, when it comes to what we contribute to this precious and brief life, repeating other people’s answers doesn’t help us answer the big questions: What do you want to contribute? What *are* you contributing? What is important to *you*?

I am a big lover of asking profound and deep questions. I call this “inquiry.” Questioning is not safe; answers are safe. Accepting someone else’s answers is safe, an ideology is safe, and a theology is safe. We seek the “right” answers because we think they will make us comfortable, protect us, and insulate us from suffering. We grasp at the first thing that makes us feel better, but truth may or may not make you feel better—some truths are beautiful, and some are shocking. However, a great vitality comes with discovering any truth, because that which is real is charged with life-force, energy, and power.

Usually, when we want to get to know someone, we are looking for answers. “What is your job? What do you do for pleasure? What movies do you like? What is your favorite book?” We want to know, and that is fine, as that is part of human communication. But asking somebody what their most important question in life is can be a much better way of getting to know them than asking about their occupation or where they live.

It is our questions that have power if we want to live an inspired life and a life that feels like it has great meaning to us. I am not talking about the conventional sense of “meaning,” like when we say, “This is the meaning of my life” and then we define that, nor am I talking about something practical, like “Four is the sum of two plus two.” I am

talking instead about the living feeling of meaning—the experience of being extraordinarily alive, here, and present. That is a profound meaning, even if it is a meaning you cannot put into words, because it is an experience and not a definition.

Questions bring us closer to that experience, though they are often paradoxical: when we first ask them, the immediate answer is a conditioned response. To dig deeply into these questions, to look deep inside oneself, is its own spiritual practice. *What is the most important thing?* So many of the answers that we have within us are there because at some point they made us feel comfortable or safe or secure, but they did so at the expense of a rich experience of being, existing, living, and even doing. The cost of not asking insightful questions is that we tend to live on automatic pilot and solely from our conditioning, most of which was imprinted in us by our culture and society, our family and friends, the education we have had, and the consensus reality that most everybody falls into without even knowing it. Anybody who is involved in any kind of excellence or profound achievement tends to question consensus reality, especially spiritual people like the Buddha or Jesus or so many others. They do not settle for a comforting belief system, and they do not comply because the authorities have suggested that is the way the world works or that is what is true; they explore these issues within themselves.

The great mythologist Joseph Campbell paraphrased Carl Jung, saying that religion is here to protect us from the truly religious experience. How does it do that? By telling us the way everything is within an ideology of theology or a belief system. We respond, “Okay, that sounds good to me, I’ll buy into it, that is the way things are,” but doing that disconnects us from true revelation, because the place where revelation occurs within us is in the unknown. Dogma fills the unknown within us with the known; religion fills us all up, and we walk around with a new ideology, which precludes having meaningful religious or spiritual experiences. This does not mean that religious people do not have religious or spiritual experiences. They do, but they have them *despite* their beliefs, not because of them. Although they may have a belief system, they continue to reach beyond dogma and beyond mere ideas.

It does not matter what the belief is—theistic, nontheistic, dualistic, nondualistic. It is our answers that blind us, that we hide behind, and that we use to protect ourselves from the great insecurity of facing our confusion and our doubt and plunging into our consciousness in a profound way.

Even if we know not to accept the answers we are given, the questions we ask can also be conditioned. Sometimes the questions that are useful are the ones that are dangerous—the ones that feel like they threaten your consensus reality. The right kinds of questions will shake up your world view. When you ask those kinds of questions, you will begin to find that the ways you have defined yourself limited you and that they are not who and what you are. This kind of questioning is big questioning.

Deep spirituality orbits around the existential questions, and we each have our own. Yours may be: *What is my place in the universe? What is God? What is life? What in the hell is going on here?* For me it was a common spiritual question—*Who am I?*—that challenged my assumptions. One day, early in my spiritual practice, the question appeared during meditation. I thought, *Wait a minute. I do not even know who I am. I do not even know who the “I” is that is seeking enlightenment. If I do not know who I am, on what basis am I asking any other question?* It occurred to me I was chasing enlightenment, but I did not even know *who* was chasing enlightenment. I realized I had better get straight on who I was. Suddenly everything was put into a different context—the enlightenment I was looking for did not seem as important as who was looking for it. That question was unsettling when it came to me. Like a slap in the face, it rearranged my priority system, because it was a deeper question than the ones I had been asking myself. As soon as this came to me, I knew I had found my orientation; I had found my most important thing in my spiritual life.

When we find that most important thing, it comes to us with a great intensity that makes us feel insecure, because it calls *everything* into question. It is disquieting, but at the same time it is inspirational, because when we ask a question of true importance, there is great energy and an expansive quality to it. Usually the true answers to these existential questions are not ones you can write down in a book; they

are more like revelations than answers. It is like the way you cannot truly describe the experience of drinking a glass of water to somebody who has never had a glass of water; the best thing you can do is hand them a glass of water so they can experience it for themselves. *Water!* Telling them what it is like is not going to be the same.

This is what important questions do. They open a space within us, clearing away the preconceived debris so that something new and transformative can arise. That is what I want to offer you: your questions—the beauty of them, the inspiration of them, the insecurity of them—because that is where your potential and your revelation lie. In fact, as a spiritual teacher, I have discovered that one of the most important things I can do is question the assumption people have that deep spiritual awakening is an uncommon event. Even ardent students believe it is extraordinary and difficult. But what if it is not all that rare and difficult? What if those beliefs are not true? Question your assumptions, lean far into the unknown. Question it all. When we do, we realize the awakening we seek is possible.



# What Are You in Service To?

IT IS NOT ABOUT BEING A NICE PERSON;  
IT IS SOMETHING FAR DEEPER THAN THAT.

*What am I in service to?* This is one of my favorite questions. It is an awakener. It is an awareness practice and an honesty practice. It is one of the big questions, up there with *What am I giving myself to?* *What is my life about?* *Who am I?* and *What is God?* If we are not asking these bigger questions, we tend to sleepwalk through life, skimming the surface, and acting and reacting from entrenched points of view and patterns of behaving.

Service is not a strictly spiritual idea or ideal; part of the human experience is to serve and to give back. To be human is to help in some way and to nurture the well-being of others. One of the beautiful things about service is that we are simultaneously taking part in the well-being of ourselves. This points to something essential about service: when it is done from a sense of wholeness, when it comes from an overflow and a sharing of an inner abundance, it is enriching and life affirming—not only for us, but for anybody involved in whatever we are trying to serve.

When I think about service, I think about my first teacher, Arvis Joen Justi. In my twenties, I became interested in Zen Buddhism through a book I read by Alan Watts. I cannot remember which one it was, but at the time, in the early 1980s, Watts was a popular writer

and one of the first people to bring Eastern spiritual teachings to the West. His book led me to one by Ram Dass, *Journey of Awakening*. In the back of that book was a directory of spiritual and contemplative centers throughout the United States. At that time, there were few Zen monasteries, or temples, or yoga retreats, so the list fit on a couple of pages; nowadays it would take volumes. One of the centers was the Los Gatos Zen Group, which was about fifteen minutes from where I lived in Northern California. I was over the moon! I had no idea what this group was or anything about it, but I telephoned and talked to the woman who became my teacher—Arvis.

She gave me directions to her place in the foothills in Los Gatos. Even though it was near my home, the location seemed obscure, and I got lost a few times on the way. When I finally arrived, it was a house. I do not know what I was expecting, but I do not think I was expecting a regular house! I was not sure if I had the right address, so I checked and rechecked. Finally, I got out of my car and walked up the driveway. A small note hung on the door. It said, “Zazen” and had an arrow pointing toward the back of the building. I knew “zazen” was the Zen term for meditation, so I figured I must be in the right place.

I walked around to the backyard, climbed the stairs, and arrived at some sliding glass doors at the rear of the house. The whole thing was unusual. A woman in her late fifties or early sixties opened the back door, and I saw another sign. This one said: “Please remove your shoes.” I kicked my shoes off and looked up at the woman to find out what to do next. All she did was stare down at my shoes. I stared too and then realized how haphazardly I had kicked them off—one on top of the other. They were not placed with attention, or mindfulness, or care. I received her silent message. I reached down and arranged my shoes neatly next to each other. She smiled a big smile and said, “Welcome!”

I received a full teaching from Arvis in those first awkward moments. When she drew my attention to how carelessly I had treated my shoes, she gave me my first lesson in what it means to be aware, to be present to everything instead of to a few chosen things that you consider important. It is all about paying attention, about being extraordinarily conscious of what is happening inside you and all around you. It was a wonderful, complete teaching that still speaks to me decades later.

I meditated with Arvis that day, and I kept coming back. Over time I saw the great amount of devotion and service she offered. She opened her house to strangers for more than thirty years. Her living room was set up for meditation—black cushions laid out on top of black mats and a small bodhisattva figure at the front of the room. Everything was understated and simple. Arvis cleared her schedule every Sunday and prepared a talk. She did not ask for anything in return. I was impressed by her quiet, humble way and the tremendous strength beneath her humility—a reservoir of clarity and wisdom, of a more awakened way of seeing and experiencing.

I will never stop reflecting upon the great devotion Arvis had to serving something that was important—something she loved. When she first started to offer teachings at her house, she would sit down after preparing everything, but nobody would show up. Still, she wrote a talk, set up her meditation room, and opened her house every single week, week after week. Sometimes, out of compassion, her husband would sit with her, but mostly she sat alone.

She continued to do this for an entire year without a single person coming. That is dedication! What service to the dharma, the Buddhist teachings—not being in service to how many people appear, to numbers or normal measures of success, but to doing what she was called to do. After a year, one person came, and for the next year it was Arvis and that one person. They sat together each Sunday morning, and Arvis gave her talk to an audience of one. As word slowly spread, more people arrived, until sometimes she would have fifteen or twenty people.

Her dedication was a great teaching for me. It touched my heart because it spoke to what service is: the willingness to put ourselves in a position of giving, to be an embodiment of what we are dedicated to, and to put our life, time, attention, and energy into the most important things. Even when Arvis was sitting in her living room alone, she was in service to all the people who might show up in the future.

Many years later, I ended up being one of those people.

Arvis was willing to serve the dharma quietly and humbly. She did not need the temple, robes, and official ceremonies, although when it came to the Buddhist teachings she could be extremely direct; there

was no messing around, and you could see her dedication to the truth. Arvis spent more than thirty years carrying on a lineage of truth teaching, as her teacher, Taizan Maezumi Roshi, and his teacher, Hakuun Yasutani, and his teacher's teachers had done for more than a thousand years. These were people who served what they loved. From her point of view, even when sitting alone she had great company—a long lineage of dharma teachers.

In the present moment, we are all serving in our own way; we are all being part of a lineage. Whether we want to or not, we are all passing something on, and we are all affecting one another, consciously or unconsciously. But do not just ask yourself what lineage you came from; inquire into your lineage going forward. What are you contributing to? What are you serving?

It is so easy for us in the West. We are so conditioned to be in the consumer mind-set, always asking, *What can this do for me?*—as in, *What can this movie do for me? What can this person do for me?* If it is a spiritual teaching: *What can this teaching do for me?* If it is a walk in the woods: *What can this walk do for me?* It is an attitude, and it is a stance. What gets lost is the acknowledgment that we are taking part in one another's lives; we are affecting the world and the beings around us. This brings up the whole notion of what we are in service *to*. What is our life an expression of? What is our contribution?

Even though it is not especially hip or popular nowadays, this idea of the necessity of service has been a part of every spiritual or religious tradition. It is not about being a nice person; it is something far deeper than that. It is about connecting to what is important in our lives—to what has been called “the deathbed virtues.” David Brooks, a commentator and author, distinguishes between “résumé virtues” and “eulogy virtues.” Résumé virtues are the things you tell someone like an employer when you are trying to sell yourself. They are what you have accomplished and succeeded at, what you are good at, and what makes you money. Then, as Brooks said, there are our eulogy virtues—the ones you might want mentioned when you are being remembered at your funeral. Our eulogy virtues connect us to the deepest part of ourselves: the effect we have on people and life around us.

Contemplating eulogy virtues helps us look inward and circles us back to the notion of service. *What am I in service to? How can I be in service to the deepest thing I know?* Contemplate this. Sit with the questions and be with them in quietness. Our most important thing may be truth, freedom, enlightenment, love, or compassion. We find what is important when we look at what we devote our time and attention to. Time and attention are our two most precious and guarded commodities as modern human beings. Think about it: most of us will give our money to a cause before we give our time and attention to it.

I am not suggesting that we impose a new idea of what we “should” be doing: “I should be contributing in this way. I should be contributing in that way.” The “should” obscures the natural goodness and inspiring energy of the heart, and so we must be on the lookout for our mind turning service into obligation. It is more about every moment of clarity, insight, or revelation having as its corollary a possibility to be put into action or to be in some way expressed. We think in big terms—it seems like today everybody wants to change the world—and sometimes I get the feeling that a lot of people do not want to be bothered with taking part in service to something unless they can create a public, visible effect or unless their actions can have a cosmic significance. That is not service; it is egotistical self-aggrandizement. Real service is a humble energy. It is looking for where you can serve the thing you love. *How can I participate in what I love? How can I be a living expression of what I love?* Not in a perfect way—you can disappear into a lot of self-judgment if you look at it through that lens—but in aspirational, small ways.

There is another way of looking at service. When Arvis silently directed my attention to how I had placed my shoes, she gave me a glimpse of how being in service to one thing is reflective of how I am in service to everything else. She demonstrated the importance of not dividing the world into “These things are worthy of my attention and my love and my service, but these other things are not,” which is looking through a dualistic and self-centered lens.

People sometimes say to me, “Well, you are a spiritual teacher, so you get to serve all the time.” Imagine if the only time I was in service—the only time I served the dharma—was when I was onstage