

The Importance of Asking the Right Questions, Self-Improvement, and Perception

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

There is a famous story that comes from Buddhism, about a mother who loses her child. The Buddha was known not only as an enlightened individual but also as someone with the ability to bring the dead back to life.

One day a woman approaches the Buddha, begging that he bring back her child from the dead. "I hear you are compassionate," she says. "Please bring my child back to life."

Seeing the woman's despair, the Buddha says, "Please go and find me a mustard seed from a household where no one has died; then I will bring your child back from the dead."

The mother begins going from door to door in her village, but she cannot find a single residence where no one has died. She leaves town to continue her search.

Although empty handed, the woman is no longer discouraged upon her return to the village. She realizes that the loss she has experienced in her son's death is something that is common to all people, and that she was being selfish in her grief, expecting that she should not have to experience death and loss, as every other household had experienced. By means of the mustard seed, the Buddha taught the woman that all people suffer death and loss. This resulted in a shift of perception that ultimately gave the mother great peace, and helped free her from an ego-centered emotion.

A similar and important lesson comes from the Bible: A woman who had committed adultery was brought before Jesus, and Jesus was asked his opinion about stoning her. His response was: "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

The stories of the Buddha and of Jesus both represent the importance of a shift in perception. Our perception of the world before us determines our reaction, and our reaction determines our destiny.

What is your destiny? Destiny is mapped out by your response to life's challenges. *How do you respond to the challenges in your life?*

- Do you resist?
- Do you resign?
- Do you complain?
- Do you try to escape to a safe place?
- Do you become vengeful?
- Do you try and prove it all wrong?

As you respond to the challenges in your life, you are creating your future. To any given challenge, you will respond differently from the next person. External factors do not determine your peace and destiny as much as *your response to external factors*. Because your destiny is determined by your response to the world around you, you must be conscientious as you encounter various conditions and circumstances in your life.

Your response is usually dictated by your emotional state. This is why working toward personal growth and continual improvement is a must. The more you are able to grow and improve, the more appropriate and beneficial your responses will become over time.

A child begins crying madly when his mother leaves the house, afraid that he may never see his mother again. As the child ages, he comes to realize that the parent will always return; therefore the child no longer reacts this way each time his mother leaves the house. The child begins growing emotionally, so he responds in more appropriate ways to the conditions he encounters in the world.

Some people do not grow, and simply continue reacting to conditions inappropriately again and again throughout their lives. I know, as I am sure you know as well, many adults who are *stuck*, and who appear not to grow anymore, emotionally or otherwise. Their immature reactions and lack of interest in growing and evolving are consistently holding them back in their lives.

If you are repeatedly responding in a particular way to a given situation, it means you have conditioned yourself to respond this way again and again. The process of personal growth and transformation is about growing out of these reactions by shifting your perceptions to see more possibility and opportunity in the situations you encounter. You learn not to resist these situations, rather to accept and understand them, while mustering appropriate reactions.

We often fail ourselves as a result of not asking the right questions. The question we most commonly ask ourselves when confronted with undesirable external conditions is "*Why?*" As in "*Why is this happening to me?*" Asking 'why' is not necessarily the most intelligent response to undesirable external conditions. If we instead ask, "*What can I do?*" we would create a different emotion within ourselves, and therefore a different outcome to our situation.

For example, if you are standing on a street corner and suddenly a bullet comes out of nowhere and strikes you in the leg, you will most likely ask the following questions:

- "Who did this to me?"
- "Why did this happen?"

This is how most people react to pain. However, the question that is most likely to lead you out of the pain you are experiencing would be "*What can I do to free myself of this pain?*" Nevertheless, most of us do not ask this question because we are not paying enough attention to the emotional state that we are in.

The next time you are in pain, you will see that you are asking questions like "Why did this happen?" and "Who did this to me?" Instead, ask, "What can I do to be free of the pain?"

Our pain comes from a lack of understanding of the governing principles of our lives, and when we ask ourselves the wrong questions. When we fail to understand the principles that govern our lives, we become upset, we blame, we become judgmental, we ask the wrong questions, and we come to erroneous conclusions. Every time a similar event happens, or we fail to achieve the desired outcome, we start to think that we are cursed, or that life is a conspiracy against us. There are many universal laws in operation at all times. A lack of understanding of these laws causes many wrong beliefs and causes us to make harmful mistakes in our lives.

One of the strongest governing principles is the law of *order and disorder*. We all go through ups and downs. For example, one day life will be perfect for us and the next day it will not be: All of a sudden something horrible may happen. It could be a disease, a relationship problem, or the loss of a job. Regardless of our place in the world and how happy we may be today, tomorrow something horrible could happen and everything could change for the worse.

Impermanence is the nature of life and the universe. Some day even the sun will burn out and die. Eventually, everything necessarily comes to an end. The laws that apply to the macro also apply to the micro: Just as the sun will die, so too will we, our family, political parties, religions, nations, and civilizations.

We can strive to have perfect lives but the "perfection" we experience will generally last only for a short time. We can strive through exercise and diet to have perfect health, but we will eventually lose our health and vitality. Life constantly oscillates between order and disorder--and the disorder part of the equation is inevitable--no matter what we may do to fight it. Disorder is a universal law, no different from gravity; trying to prevent or delay disorder, death, and so forth is futile. We must accept this fact.

You will eventually lose your job or be unable to work.

You will eventually get sick.

While it is a great challenge, accepting disorder can put us in a place of great potential. Disorder can be compared to a frog. After a frog leaps, while it is airborne, it cannot change direction. However, when the frog lands, it has a choice of choosing which direction it is going to go next. This next step, choosing where to go next, represents our reaction to disorder. How we react is a crucial choice we have to make.

When there is political disorder, we know that there will eventually be a new order. The order that comes out of a political revolution could be communism, for example. Or, the order could be martial law, or it could be democracy. *What is the correct order?* The state of disorder creates the opportunity for the group of people to reorganize under a different sort of order.

Our perceptions, emotional state, ability to solve problem, and so forth when we are confronted with disorder is what determines our outcome. For example, if you lose your job, you will be confronted with extreme disorder. How will you react to this?

- You may get depressed and start smoking all the time, while staring at the television.
- You may decide to get in prime physical and psychological shape, to be in a peak state.
- You may go back to school to learn a new skill.
- You may research all the jobs in your industry to make sure you [find the best job](#) possible.

Out of the disorder you are experiencing when losing a job, you will be faced with the challenge of reacting in either a positive or a negative way. Your ability to grow and your response to disorder will determine the quality of your life and will shape your reality. Your future is a set of possibilities that is related to the choices you make.

Disorder is a place of great potential. Your challenge is to make the best use of disorder, in order to create a superior order therefrom. Once you have mastered this, the life and career you desire can begin to take shape.

THE LESSON

Your perceptions of the world determine your reactions, and your reactions in turn determine your destiny. External factors do not dictate your life and destiny so much as your response to them, which is usually dictated by your emotional state. You must challenge yourself to make the best use of disorder in your life, and use it as a basis to develop a superior kind of order.

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