

INVESTIGATION

Listening as Deeply as We Possibly Can

By Narayan and Michael Liebenson Grady

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Narayan: We may hear the word "investigation" and think it has only to do with analyzing, because in our education and in our culture this is what is meant by investigation. Although using thought skillfully is certain a level of investigation, a deeper level of investigation in meditation doesn't have anything to do with thought. This deeper level has to do with bringing a silent, concentrated inner listening into our lives, into our moment to moment experiences. This is really what investigation is—listening deeply, as deeply as we possibly can.

To investigate is to bring a quality of openness into our life and to fully experience whatever it is that is happening without choosing sides; being for or against. The opposite of investigation is assuming—assuming that we already know how things are; this cuts off the oxygen in our minds, and cuts off the oxygen in our hearts as well. A kind of hard-heartedness emerges when we assume that we know anything at all. Investigation is very soft; it's very open. It is a certain quality of probing into; but it's not a hard, harsh kind of probing, nor a striving kind of probing. It's simply an interest in life, in all aspects of life, really wanting to know very clearly and directly for ourselves, not based on anybody else's ideas or opinions. In practice, we're doing something quite radical; we're saying, "Enough! I want to find out for myself because everything in my life depends on it."

Ajahn Sumedho talks about investigation as being the quality of affectionate curiosity. It comes out of caring—truly caring about ourselves, about others, about this life, about this world that we find ourselves in. It is not a cold, superficial analysis; it's affectionate, it's warm, it's intimate. It is an investigation about the very nature of life. This quality of investigation is, of course, strong in most children. Some years ago I was at a museum looking at some paintings. I looked around at a certain point and I noticed a child who seemed to be about two years old playing in the center of the floor where there was a very small step that one had to go down to get to the rest of the museum. This two year old was fascinated with this step: he climbed up, he climbed down, he got down and examined it, he started eating it (of course). Everyone else was walking around, "Ah, what a nice picture! Ah, what a nice..." though you could see that there was a certain

amount of boredom in the air. But this child was absolutely not bored! What was right there in the here and now for him was very interesting and it really wasn't anything at all.

This is what is meant by investigation; this innocence and curiosity about everything that we encounter. We are learning how to let go of our attitudes in order to be willing to see. We're not trying to assume any particular perspective, any particular attitude. We're not attempting to create any particular images, images about ourselves or images about the world. We are attempting, rather, to let go of our images and perspectives.

There are clearly different levels upon which investigation occurs. One level is which investigation occurs. One level is the investigation of our personal stories. This is an important level of investigation; often this work is done in therapy. This kind of insight can come quite naturally through practice, as well, as we notice repetitive thought patterns. Investigative practice can, however, bring us to a deeper aspect, which is not so much an investigation of a personal story as investigation of a human being's story. What this means is that we look deeply into what is common to us as human beings; what connects us, what binds us together. What is common to all phenomena? And what we begin to see, of course, is that regardless of our personal stories or histories, everything is changing, all the time. Everything that arises also passes away, everything that appears also disappears. That which appears to be solid, upon closer examination, is seen to be just energy. We begin to learn that no thought, emotion, sight, sound, smell or physical sensation can possibly bring lasting contentment. We find great peace in letting go of the hope of finding something that will.

It is easy for us to react blindly to what is happening within us as well as outside of us. This is an instinct that we have—we can react to stimuli. Without an awareness practice, without investigation, we tend to be drawn in by what looks attractive or appears to be pleasant; and we normally pull away from what appears to be unpleasant or frightening. We also don't pay much attention at all when experiences are neither pleasant nor unpleasant. But we are blessed, really, with minds that have the ability to be attentive. Not all life forms have this particular capacity. We can be grateful we are here as human beings with this ability. With investigation, with attentiveness, we have the option to not blindly react to what is occurring in the environment, or to what arises inwardly. We have the alternative of investigation, of paying attention with a great deal of openness and a real freshness of mind. Each one of us has the ability to observe.

Let's say we are experiencing something—a particular state of mind, or a particular thought, or a particular sensation—and we are lost in it, overwhelmed it. Instantly, upon remembering that we have this capacity to observe, this capacity to look deeply and to investigate, we have the ability to free ourselves from its clutches. Instead of being lost in boredom or lost in anger, or lost when we become upset, disturbed, irritated, frustrated or annoyed, it may be possible to observe our annoyance or our anger or our frustration. We have this capacity to look deeply and to investigate instead of being tossed around. We have the capacity to look more deeply, to call forth stillness from within. This is what makes all the difference. Each time one notices that one has been lost there is a little bit of freedom, a little bit of insight that occurs. Investigation brings about faith and inner

confidence. Investigation is very soft; it's very open. It's really simply an interest in how things are.

From this perspective, it doesn't matter what the contents of consciousness are. If anger is occurring, we can recognize anger as a mental state. If we can look more deeply and stay with it long enough we see that it actually dissolves or disappears or changes into something else. Much of investigation has to do with staying with the experience until we see a change.

In fully experiencing the body and the mind, we may experience a sense of discomfort that is a natural element in life. If we can acknowledge this discomfort fully we can open up into something that's very free. It can take away from the personal sense that this is just hard for me, when the reality is that it's often hard to be a human being. When my sister's children were little she used to say to them, "I know, I know, it's hard to be a baby!" One might think it's kind of nice to be a baby; you get taken care of and all, but her understanding which I think was quite accurate is that it's really hard to be a baby; it's a lot of work. And it becomes more work as one grows up! But if we can acknowledge this, some space opens up and we can sit with serenity in the midst of our life. We can sit with intense discomfort with great comfort. We can sit with intense pleasure with a sense of ease. We can sit when our experience of life is neither uncomfortable nor pleasurable.

In the guided practice session in the morning when we focused on exploring the sensations in the hands, some of you mentioned that many of the thoughts were either, "Oh, there's nothing happening in the hands...I want to get something done; I want to go where there's pain," or, "I want to go have a good time; I want to go to where there's pleasure." Neutrality is not something we're so interested in usually. It's not passionate, it's not culturally interesting, it's not stimulating. And yet, for many of us, life is just ordinary much of the time. Can we be aware of the experience of neutrality?

It is helpful to be able to stay with pain until we see it change. It is helpful to be able to stay with pleasure until we see it change. It is helpful to be able to stay with neutrality until we see it change. In doing so, we can begin to see that what we thought to be inherently a certain way, isn't. Without investigation we may think, ice cream is always pleasurable; a particular posture is always painful; paying attention to the hands is always neutral—when in actuality, everything is changing. To see this can free us from the cycle of moving towards pleasure and away from pain. Most of us already have areas in our life where we are naturally investigative—it might be in relationship or while cooking or when walking in nature. But for many of us there are also places where we do not even think of the possibility of investigating. We seem quite sure that there's no reason to. An important part of our investigation in practice is looking into those areas which we find difficult to investigate.

We put ourselves and we put others in these little boxes and then we say, "This is who you are, and this is who I am," but then, with a curious, affectionate quality of investigation, we look more deeply and we see, "Ah, this is a state of mind, this is a thought. It is not who I am. It is a thought." So much of the box created is just a

construction of thought. We can see how much we define ourselves—and confine ourselves—by the thoughts that arise and pass away, by the feelings, or the emotions, or the states of mind that arise and pass away.

This openness of investigation is something that we can really work with in our lives, work with in our practice. Noticing when we are having these thoughts of "I know you," or "I know myself," and then seeing if we can look a little bit deeper, a little bit further, investigating the mental constructions, the belief systems, the thoughts based on conditioning, the thoughts based on emotions. It is really quite exciting.

Assuming that we don't know leaves an enormous space in which we can truly begin to learn on a nonverbal level. The understanding that begins to emerge is a growing inner sensing, a growing presence which may include but is not confined to words or concepts.

Michael: Ajahn Maha Boowa, a great teacher from the Thai forest tradition, describes the process of investigation in insight meditation as *sati-pannà*. This path of inquiry joins mindfulness, *sati*, with clarity of understanding or *pannà*. The investigative process uses mindfulness to question, to observe and discover the true nature of our experience. With investigation leading the way, the changing nature of our experience becomes apparent, as well as the wisdom to see that the source of our discontent comes from clinging to these changing experiences.

To investigate and discover the deepest levels of truth and inner freedom, one has to begin to pay attention in a new way. At the heart of Buddhist meditation is this spirit of investigation. In his advice to the *Kalāmas* (AN 3.65) the Buddha stresses the importance of inquiry in any spiritual practice, making a clear distinction between faith based on beliefs and faith based on investigation and direct experience. However, learning to observe without the reference of secondhand knowledge and without preconceptions of what we are going to find requires courage and energy. It can help to have a sense of immediacy in one's practice—particularly during the times when our efforts to awaken become lax or when we find ourselves slipping into habit or preoccupation with all the endless dramas that fill our lives. There are many ways of cultivating a sense of immediacy and some reflections work better than others, depending on one's personality and motivation level.

In the Thai forest tradition, an awareness of death provides a compelling sense of immediacy in one's practice. The great 20th century forest monk, Ajahn Mun, took the sense of immediacy to the farthest edge. He chose to live in the forest, day and night, and consciously chose the areas where tigers were dwelling. He and his monks did a lot of walking meditation: they set up a walking path of thirty or forty feet, and set two large candles at each end, and just walk back and forth. Ajahn Mun would do this all night, up to twelve hours at a stretch—fast walking, slow walking, medium, varying it a lot. I want to spend my life as aware as possible—I want to get to the truth of what this life is all about. And while walking at night there would be sounds of tigers, close by, growling. There are many stories of monks encountering tigers, sometimes successfully, sometimes

not! But this factor gave his practice a real sense of immediacy—every step could easily have been his last step.

And I think all of us have our own tigers. When I start getting lazy and find myself slipping into old habits, and find myself getting preoccupied with all the little dramas and contents of whatever is going on, I take a few minutes to reflect on the fact that life is going by very quickly and how do I want to spend it? And I always come up with the same answer, that I want to spend it as aware as possible of what my experience is, and I want to get to the truth of what this life is all about. Having a sense of urgency in practice has to be balanced by wisdom which recognizes and tempers the striving mind—the mind that is trying to make something happen. With investigation we are not trying to make anything happen, but rather our energies are directed towards seeing more fully and directly what is already happening. This requires a balanced effort. The spacious and accept-ing qualities of mindfulness create the climate for experiences to surface and concentration enables us to sustain the attention needed to experience the present moment more fully. The power of concentration helps harness and focus the energies needed to investigate our experience in a fresh way.

The simplicity and solitude of the forest tradition encouraged concentration. Yet, most of us live lives which are complex and demanding. Concentration does not come easily for many of us; it takes work to cultivate it. I think this is why it is so essential to keep a daily for mal practice going and to take retreat time whenever possible. We need to take the time to focus our attention and to say to ourselves, "I am going to look at my life as deeply as possible and try to keep my attention there long enough to understand better the true nature of this body-mind process." Quite often we can be aware of what our experience is in a general way, touching it perhaps for a few moments with a vague awareness, but our attention gets distracted and the investigation of "what is" gets blocked. This distracted state of affairs keeps our understanding on the surface and often fuels discontent rather than liberating us from confusion. Living an ethical life based on authenticity and principles of non-harm is also essential in freeing energy and keeping us focused in our inquiry. If we are in earnest in our efforts to discover the deepest levels of truth and freedom within us, our actions in relationships must begin to support this process. There is no better way to stifle investigation and liberation than attaching to pretense or harming ourselves or others. When we are caught up in our conditioned aversion and fear of the unpleasant, or clinging to the pleasant through fantasy and unskillful action, opening up to the experience in a full and direct way is difficult, at best.

One crucial way to develop equanimity is through investigating our reactions when they arise. Much of our practice in investigation requires opening to reactions without identifying with the reactions; that is, investigating reactions with the silence of mindfulness and a deep interest in listening without the "I" or "me" closing in around the experience. Holding on to any concepts and images of "I" or "me" prevents us from seeing in a new way. The "I" or "me" is the legacy of the past; it represents the known. When life is experienced and filtered through assumptions and habit, we become de-energized and life can become joyless. One crucial way to develop equanimity is through investigating our reactions when they arise.

Investigation also includes examining, through observation, the attitudes and preconceptions that we hold towards others—attitudes which prevents us from engaging in relationships in an open and direct way. When we think we know someone, we no longer are in relationship with a living changing being. Rather we are now in relationship with an idea of that person. Investigation can bring new energy and joy to our relationships because we are paying attention with interest, while opening to the actuality of change. Through investigation we strengthen our capacity to live without fear and to live in harmony with the changing nature of our lives. When we can face the truth without contracting inwardly through clinging or aversion, we can discover peace in genuine confidence because we no longer rely on that which is fleeting.

**Fall 1996
Insight Journal
Barre Center for Buddhist Studies**