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Two Questions That Could Change Your Life

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Oprah.com | From the November 2002 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*



*Bulletin: A revolutionary technique might very well alter the way you handle difficulties. Raphael Cushnir, author of *Unconditional Bliss: Finding Happiness in the Face of Hardship (Quest)*, reports on the most unexpected path to joy, release and freedom.*

My wife's voice on the phone was panicked.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Stay there," she said. "I'm coming home."

"Is it bad?"

"Yes, it's bad."

In the 20 minutes it took for Lynda to arrive, I sat on the porch trying to imagine what had happened. Was it about illness? Work? Money?

Lynda pulled into the driveway, and I followed her inside. She looked me in the eye for a split second, then looked away.

"I'm having an affair," she said. "I don't think I can stop."

There it was. The single thing I had never considered.

For the next three months, as we separated, I was utterly lost. Every moment felt like a punch in the gut. I knew there was something I needed to do with my pain, but what? I asked a friend, an ex-Zen monk, who said, "Nothing. Do absolutely nothing to change how you feel. Every time your mind tries to figure this out, just reel it back in. Every time you're tempted by distraction, stay put and pay close attention."

My friend's advice sounded excruciating, but it also struck a chord. I decided to try it, to just sit in the soup of my suffering. I lived that way for three more months.

Then one day during my [morning meditation](#), I had a mysterious flash of grace: I was filled with peace, joy, and a

love beyond comprehension. My circumstances hadn't changed, yet everything felt completely different. I thought it might be a reaction to all the pain, like a pendulum swinging, but I never swung back the other way. It's been seven years now, and whenever I tell this story, people ask, "Are you saying you live in a state of bliss all the time?" The answer, of course, is no. It's always available to me, but I'm not always available to it.

Over time I began to investigate what brought me toward that wonderful state, and what steered me away from it. As I shared my observations, it became clear that what I found within myself also applied to others. Whenever something happens in our lives that we don't want, we instinctively push it away. This is true of both the smallest annoyance, like a mosquito, and the greatest misery, like the death of a loved one. Such a contraction can be physical, emotional, mental, or all three. Contractions are as natural as they are unavoidable. But when we stay contracted past the initial response, that's resistance—a decision to say no to reality. Resistance can last just a few moments or a lifetime.

Next: [How to let go of resistance by Living the Questions](#)

Whether conscious or not, resistance is always a choice. Overweight? Can't bear to look in the mirror. Dead-end job? Zone out till quitting time. Appalled by the state of the world? Boycott the nightly news. The more we resist, the more stuck we become. And what we refuse to feel never goes away; it festers. Resistance causes us to abandon our bodies, the present moment, and any chance of changing things for the better.

Resistance is like stepping on a hose with all our might and commanding the water to flow. But if we can simply step off the hose and allow the water of our reactions to flow through us, we eventually arrive at a state of expansion. While on the surface this may seem passive, it's anything but. In an expanded state, we're freer, more creative, and better able to break through barriers.

The more I began to talk about releasing resistance, the more people asked me how to do it in real time—when traffic was backed up, the baby was screaming, or the same old argument was spinning out of control. In response I conceived the simple process called Living the Questions. Simple, but not easy. It takes courage, practice, and a willingness to open where we're habitually closed.

The initial step is to become aware of what we're resisting and decide whether we even want to let go. If we do, there are only two questions to ask. The first is, What is happening right now? In asking, we pay specific attention to the sensations in our bodies and any emotions associated with them. Instead of looking for an answer, we just allow what's there to make itself known. The second question is, Can I be with it? To be with what's happening means embracing whatever we find with no agenda whatsoever. In the expansion that follows, what's been trapped is free to chart its own course.

A few months ago, I met with a 40-year-old woman named Susan who hated her job as a home health aid. She judged herself harshly for her feelings, but realized she'd never feel successful until she had a flashy, executive position. At the same time, she felt paralyzed by the prospect of career change. A job counselor friend kept offering to help, but she was too tense to schedule a meeting.

Susan greeted me with a healthy dose of skepticism. "Look," she said. "I feel my feelings. I read plenty of [self-help books](#). How can something so basic as these two questions get me over such a big block?"

Rather than provide a conceptual response, I suggested we dive right in. "Focus on your work dilemma," I said, "with all its intense frustration. Let it fill you up. With particular attention on your body, tell me what is happening right now?"

Susan closed her eyes and took a deep breath. After a few moments she responded, "There's a tightness in my chest. And my jaw's clenched."

"Can you be with it?" I asked. "Not the whole issue—just the tightness and the clenching. For this moment only, can you accept with 100 percent of your being that it's actually happening? You don't have to like it. You don't have to give up your desire to change it. All you have to do is open to it completely."

Susan shrugged, decided to give it a try. For a minute or so I sat with her in stillness. Then I repeated the first question. "What is happening right now?"

"I'm angry," she said. "At myself for being stuck, at the people I work with... at life."

I sensed we were getting closer to her core resistance but weren't there yet. So I asked Susan to be with that anger and see where it led. I watched her face redden and her whole body go rigid. Then she abruptly pulled out of the experience.

"Why am I doing this?" she protested. "It makes me feel what a failure I am. That's exactly what I don't want."

Next: 3 things to steer clear of during the self-inquiry process

I explained to Susan how she'd reached a point that can trip up even the most emotionally literate. We're often willing to feel difficult feelings, but only for a brief period before contracting against them. This creates the illusion of emotional flow while preventing real shifts. To expand fully means allowing emotions to rise and fall, to come and go in their own time. Even though it can feel like forever, letting go of resistance in this manner always yields the quickest result.

"Wait a minute," Susan said. "Are you saying the best way for me to become successful is to feel more like a failure?"

"At first, yes. Because that sense of failure is what you've resisted for so long. Opening to it is the only way out."

Susan hesitated, then realized there was little to lose. She settled back into her body and the sensations that failure elicited.

"There's sadness," she said, "mostly in my throat. And I feel young. Really, really young." Soon Susan was crying, at first just a few tears, then big, racking sobs. Eventually, the crying subsided, and for the first time I could feel Susan's vitality, her presence. She could, too.

"Okay, now I get it," she said softly. "No more pushing it away. I still feel sad, but also hopeful. More...real."

"What about the job issue?" I asked. "From this place, could you meet your career counselor friend?"

Susan thought about it for a moment, nodded, and we both knew she was on her way. A few months later, I checked in to see how she was doing. "I'm still searching for the right job," she said. "But the sense of failure lifted quickly. It's like I can finally accept my own worth. So, to be honest, the job change doesn't seem as pressing."

For most of us, the first time we shift from resistance to expansion just by accepting what's already happening, there's a similar "aha." Once that occurs, and we're motivated to continue with self-inquiry, we see that we're in some degree of resistance almost all the time. A pounding headache, money woes, other people's opinions—there's no end to what we resist. Everywhere we turn, there's another opportunity to inquire and open.

While no quick fix, Living the Questions is self-inquiry at its most practical and immediate. After a few days of

practice, the questions begin to function at a level deeper than language. We no longer need to recite them. Instead they become our essential attitude.

There are, however, three subtle ways to undermine the process. The first is by analyzing—instead of asking what is happening right now, we get stuck trying to figure out why. This creates a false expectation, abetted by our cognitive culture, that understanding feelings will make them go away. Sure there's a time for analysis, but only after we've embraced our emotional reality. Otherwise we struggle to untangle that hose while stepping on it even harder.

The second way to undermine the process is by judging—we decide something is wrong with what's happening. Whether we find fault with others or ourselves, judging is an impediment to presence.

The third way is by bargaining, pretending to be with what's happening in order to make it change as quickly as possible. This attempt to outfox reality bars us from genuine acceptance.

Once we're able to steer clear of analyzing, judging, and bargaining, the questions become a powerful tool for navigating life's challenges. Regarding my marriage, the decision to end it came with complete acceptance about two years after the initial separation. The timing allowed me to take full responsibility for my role in the trauma, gave Lynda the opportunity to find her own healing path, and helped us remain the closest of friends.

Everything I learned on my journey turns out to be nothing new. I stumbled onto an insight at the root of the world's great wisdom traditions: What we resist persists. When we summon the courage to release that resistance, we find joy that endures not in spite of our sorrows, but paradoxically right along with them.

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