

## Guiding Truths

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How are you suffering right now? What can you do about it? Those are the questions the Buddha has you ask: suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. These are the Buddha's truths, but not his own personal truths. These are the only truths to which he gave the name *ariya sacca*, or noble truth. In other words, these are standard all across the board. And all of his teachings are centered on just these issues. We know this, we've heard it many times. The Buddha says that all he teaches is suffering and the end of suffering, and yet you look in the books and there seems to be so much more. People are often tempted to try to create a systematic philosophy out of what the Buddha taught, but all his many teachings are basically different approaches to these two issues: how to understand suffering, how to put an end to it.

Any other truth, he said, is a *pacceka sacca*, a personal truth: something that strikes you as true because of the particulars of your experience, but those particulars keep changing. Your idea of what's true out there or what's true in here can change. But the nature of suffering itself, that doesn't change. There are particulars about how and why you're suffering at a particular moment, but the actual fact of the suffering is something that's standard across the board.

And it's the one issue that scientists can't answer. They can account for all kinds of things. They can map the brain, see which parts of the brain serve as pain centers, talk about how the nervous system reacts to pain. But the actual experience of pain, how it feels, that's something they can not account for. And so from the Buddha's point of view, a lot of what they have to say is beside the point. The real question is, what is the direct experience of pain, suffering, stress? What causes it? You ask what causes it so you can put an end to the cause and thus put an end to the stress.

It's almost as if the Buddha's whole life was an experiment. He asked himself, "Suppose that there is an end to suffering, what would that mean?" And he explored all the implications of that hypothesis, and he found that it worked. It led to an actual end of suffering. This is why his truths carry duties or tasks. They're not simple statements about reality, or attempts to describe reality, they're pointers that involve tasks. Whenever any issue comes up in your life, ask yourself, "Where is the suffering right now?" Try to comprehend it. And see that there is a difference, say, between physical pain and the mental suffering

that goes along with it. Focus on the mental suffering, for that's the real issue. It's like the watering hole in the middle of a desert or savannah. If you want to see what's living in the savannah, go to the watering hole, for all the animals have to go there in the course of the day. So watch there at the pain, at the suffering, to see what else comes around. See what arises together with the suffering and the pain. That's one of the meanings of *samudaya* or origination: the things that arise together with the suffering. You'll find that the two important "arising together" are craving and ignorance. Try to identify exactly what craving is happening here right now. You'll find that often it's a craving for a particular type of sensual pleasure, because for most of us that's our only knowledge of how to get away from pain: go for the sensual pleasure. But when you really look at pleasure, though, what does it have to offer? It comes and goes very quickly. Before you can even catch hold of it, it's gone. As when you have your nose up against a cold window pane and, breathing out, you create fog on the glass: Before you can even determine what shape that little patch of fog takes, it's gone. If you try to catch hold of it, what have you got? You can't catch the fog. All you've got is the tension in the hand that tries to catch hold.

In the same way, you think you can catch hold of pleasure, but all you really get is the act of clinging. You cling to the memory of the pleasure, you cling to the anticipation of the pleasure, or you tense up around the pain, the memory and anticipation of the pain. So much of our lives is centered on trying to run after pleasure, hoping to find it one way or another, in relationships, in things, in positions in society. All these things we do for that little, tiny taste of pleasure.

The problem is that it's so little, so tiny, and yet so much work goes into trying to maintain it. This is one of the reasons why we tend to not be very honest with ourselves about what our purpose is, say, in a relationship. If we ask ourselves if the whole relationship was just for that little bit of pleasure, well, an awful lot of effort went into it. And it seems beneath us, unworthy of us, so we deal in all kinds of abstractions to justify what we are pursuing in a particular relationship, or in a particular activity. We dress things up in vast, cosmic or psychological terms. But if you put yourself in a position where you can be honest about it, you begin to realize that there's an awful lot in life that's not worth the effort. All these fleeting pleasures that we chase after, there's not nearly enough reward for all the effort that goes into trying to freeze them, solidify them, to the point where you can actually grasp at them, grasp hold of them.

And of course it never really works. It just keeps slipping through your grasp, and what you're left with is the tension of the grasp, the tension of the clutching hand that tries to hold onto these things. That of course leads to more suffering. It's when you can finally look at this and see it for what it is, that's when you're

in a position where you can really apply the path. In fact the seeing of the process is the beginning of the path. You begin to get a little bit of disenchantment with the craving. As long as you're not disenchanted with craving, it's hard to practice the path. It's hard even to get on the path. But seeing the suffering and seeing the problems that come along with it, that's what gets you on the path. Even though you don't fully comprehend the suffering at that point yet, you don't yet totally let go of the craving, at least you begin to see the drawbacks. That in itself is the beginning of Right View.

From there you develop all the other factors of the Path, particularly Right Concentration, which gives the mind the strength it needs in order to pull away from the craving, to pull out of its old habits. Because the mind needs pleasure, so you give it the pleasure of concentration. Once it has the pleasure of concentration, it has a point of comparison from which it can look at all the other pleasures that it has been running after and be really honest about their drawbacks. This honesty is what allows you to let them go.

Ultimately, all you have left is the attachment to the Path itself, attachment to the pleasure that comes from Right Concentration, and you work on letting go of that. That's what frees you. And this total freedom was how the Buddha proved to himself that his approach was right: It is possible to put an end to suffering.

So these four truths are the only ones you have to take as totally absolute, totally true. Of course, the released mind goes beyond these truths as well. But as long as you are here in the midst of suffering, these are the only ones you have to hold on to, to trust as being absolutely certain. Whatever other issues may come up in the mind, view them as provisional. Those aren't the real issues. No matter how real and insistent they may seem, you have to learn how to put a little question mark next to them. Then break them down into the terms of the four noble truths.

Because the four noble truths are so basic and well known, we forget how radical they are. But if you learn how to use them in a radical way, they can really show their power. They're like a universal solvent that can dissolve every other issue in the mind. They keep us on the right track, keep us from getting distracted and led astray, weighing our minds down with all sorts of unnecessary theories and questions and ideas and guesswork. They do this by focusing our attention on the immediate issue: What is the suffering right now? What are you doing that's aggravating the suffering? Can you stop? What do you need to do in order to stop? Those are the questions you can apply to any issue at any time. They focus directly on your own experience, the part of your own experience that nobody else can know.

This is why the Buddha said the Dhamma is *paccatam*, individual. It's universal in its truth, but very individual and very direct in how you are

experiencing it right now —which is why the truths are also *opanayiko* pertinent, relevant all the time. They're always there to put to use. They're always there to depend on.

So don't ever let yourself think that you're left adrift without a compass. When things seem confusing, when things seem chaotic in life, fall back on these truths, and they'll show you the way out.