

The Thinking Heart

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In Western languages, we have separate words for heart and mind. But in most of the countries where Buddhism has spread, they don't have separate words. They use one word for both. And even in the ones where they do have two words, like Thai—they have *cit* for mind and *cai* for heart—the words are pretty interchangeable. This reflects the Buddha's insight that there's really not that clear a dividing line between your heart and your mind. Your emotions have thoughts; your thoughts have emotions.

The big problem for the heart, of course, is suffering. And it's hard to separate that from thinking. As the Buddha said, our first response to suffering is bewilderment, trying to figure it out: "Why is this happening?" And then the second thought: "Is there anybody out there who knows a way to put an end to this suffering?" So the suffering already has us thinking. In fact, you might say that if we didn't suffer, we wouldn't be thinking. It's because of suffering that we're spurred to try to figure things out.

Isaac Newton once said that if the orbit of the moon hadn't been so erratic and complex, mathematics wouldn't have developed as quickly as it had. As people were trying to figure out the orbit of the moon, they had to come up with very sophisticated math. The question is, why were they trying to figure out the orbit of the moon? Because of astrology. They figured that the movements of the moon were going to have an impact on your life: So again, the question was whether you were going to suffer or not.

So, all our thinking comes from suffering. It's an issue both of the heart and the mind together. And, from the Buddha's point of view, it's not a question of heart versus mind. It's simply that our thinking is confused when we come to the issue of suffering. There are so many things in the world that we've figured out, but when it comes to why the mind suffering is, our thinking gets very vague and backwards. What he tries to do in his teaching is to give us some insight into how you can really think about suffering in a way that thinks straight and does put an end to suffering.

That's what the four noble truths are all about. They speak to this problem of the heart, which is the problem of suffering. But they apply your mind to it. If we think in terms of mind and heart being separate, the four noble truths try to get them back together again, so that your mind can talk to your heart in a way that puts an end to the heart's big problem.

So there are four noble truths. Why are they four? Why are they noble? Why are they true?

They're four because suffering is a problem with a cause. We much prefer to have it end. That's what the truths are for: to put an end to suffering. That, together with the Buddha's insight that it's going to have to come about through action. And action is based on desire. So to get the result of putting an end to suffering, you need skillful causes: skillful desires, skillful actions. And if suffering is the result, the causes are unskillful desires, unskillful actions. So it's two things—actions and results—divided into two types: skillful and unskillful. That's why we have four.

Why are they noble? The word *noble* has two meanings in Pali. One is something higher than the normal, something to aspire to. In this case, the Buddha says, our lives are a search: the search to put an end to suffering. It comes from the bewilderment. And we end up searching either for something that is going to grow ill, age, and die or something that doesn't. If we're looking for things that age, grow ill, and die, we're going to just pile on more suffering. We're not getting to where we want to go. That kind of search, the Buddha said, is ignoble.

He tried a couple of ignoble searches in the course of his practice. He started out pursuing sensual pleasures and found that they didn't lead to where he wanted to go. He tried self-torment, thinking that if he could purify himself simply by enduring pain, that would put an end to suffering. But it didn't. It was only when he found the middle way that he was able to find the way that goes to the end of suffering, going to something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die. And part of that way is right view. That's what the four noble truths are: the terms of right view.

So these are the truths that guide us in that noble search. It's one of the reasons why the truths are noble.

Another is that they're universal. That's the other meaning of the word *ariya* in Pali: universal. The Buddha compares these noble truths to what he says are individual truths or personal truths: things that may be true for you, but not true for other people. He's not interested in teaching those. He's teaching something that's true for everybody, no matter how old you are, what your background is, what your gender is, or any of the other things that we use to divide us up into individual groups or different groups. This is something we have all in common: why we suffer and how we can put an end to it. The details of how we suffer will be individual, but the cure is always the same.

And part of the cure is understanding that you're suffering not because of things outside, but because of your own craving. You have to look at the cause. The cause is not out there. It's in your craving. And the suffering itself, as the Buddha said, is in a place you might not expect it. It's in your clinging. What this means is you're actually *doing* the suffering. You're holding on, feeding on things. And the act of feeding is suffering. That's counterintuitive. We tend to think of suffering as something that hits us. We're on the passive receiving end. But, as the Buddha pointed out, that's not the case.

So seeing things in this way, you realize that the path to the end of suffering has to attack the problem at the cause. As I was saying this afternoon, you go into a house. You see it's full of smoke but if you simply try putting out the smoke, it's never going to end. You've got to find the cause, the fire. You put that out, and that's the end of the problem with the smoke.

So the purpose of this path that we're practicing is to put an end to craving. Part of that is through developing right concentration so that we have a sense of well-being. You sit here with the breath coming in and going out. Try to breathe in a way that, at the very least, feels good, feels okay. And if you learn how to protect that sense of being okay right here, you'll find that the sense of ease will grow. That sense of ease not only gives you a good place to stay and encouragement on the path, but it also allows you to look at the problem of suffering without being overwhelmed by it, without feeling threatened by it because you know you've got a good place you can retreat to. You can see your cravings, not as your friends, but as your enemies. That way you can let them go.

So these are the truths that help us look into the problem of suffering so that we can solve the problem at the cause rather than solving it at the end.

A few years back, when I was in Thailand, I read an article about some high-ranking government officials from Bangkok going out to a far distant part of the country. There was a little school, and the kids looked so poor as they lined up in front of the school to receive these important visitors from Bangkok. So the visitors then arranged for them to have school uniforms so that they'd look nice the next time visitors came out. Well, that's attacking the problem at the result. You have to look at why the families are so poor to begin with. Maybe you can do something about that. But they tried solving the problem at the result, which doesn't solve anything much at all. You want to solve it at the cause.

Another aspect of why the truths are noble is because they have you step back from your craving, step back from your clinging. These are the things that we invest ourselves in most. We actually identify with these things. As a result, we go around "obeying our thirst," as that old Sprite commercial used to say. And

learning how to step back from our thirst, to step back from our clinging and feeding: That's a noble act. That's really what makes us human beings as opposed to animals. It gives us some nobility.

At the same time, these truths do provide guidance to the path that truly leads to that goal: a goal where there's no aging, no illness, no death. And that's why they're true.

But they're an interesting kind of truth. When the Buddha uses the word *truth*, he uses it in two senses. One is statements about the way things are. And then, two, the actual reality, or the actual experience that the statements describe. When we first encounter the noble truths, they're words. But they're pointing to something that's already happening in our experience: the suffering, the craving, and the potentials for the path. So when the Buddha says that you abandon the truth of the cause of suffering, you don't abandon the statement about it. You abandon the actual experience of the cause.

When he says to comprehend the truth of suffering, again it's not simply a matter of comprehending the words. You're actually trying to comprehend, when there's suffering in the mind, what's actually going on. Developing the fourth noble truth, again, you don't develop the words. You develop the qualities in the mind that are called for by the path. But eventually, as you develop the path and perform all the other duties appropriate to the truths, you find that the four noble truths take you to something beyond them.

There's an interesting passage where Anathapindika has gone to see some wanderers from other sects. It was early in the morning. The monks were out on their alms round; it was too early to visit either them or the Buddha, so he said to himself, "Well, I'll see what these people have to say." He goes and he listens to their doctrines. And he points out to them that all their doctrines are put together, fabricated. Because anything fabricated is stressful, in holding onto their doctrines, they're holding onto stress.

Then they ask him, "Well, what's your view?" He says, "Whatever is fabricated, put together, is stressful. Whatever is stressful is not me, not mine, not my self." So they tried to turn the tables on him and said, "Well, you're holding onto that doctrine. That, too, is holding onto stress." And he says, "No. By holding onto this and practicing in line with it, I get beyond it."

This is why the four noble truths are special. They take you to a truth that's beyond them because they force you to look at what your mind is doing, to see everything in the mind as processes. When you get involved with pleasure, where does it come from? Where does it go? When you're dealing with pain, where did the pain come from? And where does it go? In other words, what did you do to

give rise to these things, and what do they lead you to do? You look at the causes for whatever's unskillful and you learn how to let go of them.

But then you realize that the guidance you've gotten from the four noble truths: That, too, is something fabricated. That, too, is something simply put together. It's still not the deathless. So you look at it as a process as well. This is the part where, as Ajaan Mun said, all the four noble truths become one, with one duty: Let go through dispassion. And in the letting go, you finally get to that noble goal—not the true statement about the goal, but the true experience of the goal itself. That's where the noble truths take you. And that's the point where both the heart and mind are totally satisfied.

As Ajaan Suwat said, once you achieve that ultimate happiness, then that's what it is. Ultimate happiness. Totally satisfying. You have no questions about who's experiencing or why or what. The experience is sufficient in and of itself. And that speaks to the heart's deepest desire, to put an end to suffering.

To end suffering, we have to learn how to think about it properly. This is why the Dhamma is called the language of the heart: not because it comes out of the heart, but because it's part of the mind that can speak to the heart in a way that helps it understand what its problems are.

Another phrase you might use for this is the intelligent heart or the thinking heart. It's willing to listen to that language, to follow through with the instructions and to find that totally satisfactory goal where all thinking can stop because it's served its purpose. This is the most noble thing we can aim for—noble because it makes us behave in an honorable way, and noble because it's universal: It's something we all can aim for. It's open to us all.

A while back I was reading some scholars saying that the four noble truths are true only for noble ones. Well, how do you get to be a noble one? You follow the four noble truths. So they're already true statements for you. They're true for all of us. They offer to all of us that help we're looking for in our bewilderment, in our desire to find a way to put an end to the suffering. That's the Buddha's gift. We simply have to follow their guidance to find the experience of the truth to which they point.