

The Four Noble Truths from Within

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We've all probably experienced that point in childhood when you wonder: Do other people experience the world the way you do? We can point to something that's blue and agree that it's blue, but do other people experience blue the way that you do? You wonder about that for a while and then you put it aside. It's not that big a problem. But it does point to something very important, that we each have a world we experience from inside and which we don't share with anyone else.

And it turns out that there are actually some issues in that area of our experience that *are* big problems. The big number one problem is the problem of stress and suffering, the problem of pain. You feel your pain, and nobody else can feel it. It's something you experience, all on your own, from within. When a politician says he feels your pain, you wonder what he's feeling, but he's certainly not feeling your pain. He may be sympathizing. We do sympathize with one another when we see the signs that someone else is in pain, but both the feeling of sympathy and the pain are something totally inward. Your sympathy and my pain are two different things.

The Buddha's approach is to focus precisely on this area of your awareness: how you experience things from within, how you experience experience from within. And to find, also within, a solution to the problems that come from within. In teaching this path that we're following, he gives us a vocabulary to understand how we experience things from within. Our culture doesn't give us much of a vocabulary for this area of experience, especially nowadays when science tries to define us in terms of our bodies as measured from outside. They such an elaborate vocabulary for that aspect of the body that we get overwhelmed. They tell us how the breath, for instance, can be measured from outside, and so we forget to notice how we experience things like the breath from within.

What can we do about that? Try to get in touch with the most direct experience you have of things, prior to the vocabulary of science.

One of the first things you notice about your experience when you look at it directly is that you're not totally passive. You can do things. There are certain things you can change, certain things you can adjust.

There are certain things you can move in certain directions, and there other things you can't.

Take your body, for instance. The Buddha talks about the body as you experience from within, in terms of the four properties: solidity - which he calls earth; liquidity - water; energy - breath or wind; and then warmth, which he calls fire. As you're focusing on the breath, it's good to remember that we're not here worried about the air that scientists might be able to measure coming in and out through the nose. We're concerned with the flow of energy in the body that we feel directly because it's something we can adjust.

This process of adjusting our experience, having intentions and shaping our experience: The Buddha calls that fabrication. And one of his important insights is that if you do this fabrication in ignorance, you're going to suffer. But if you learn how to do it with knowledge, specifically knowledge of the four noble truths, you can take that process of fabrication and turn it into a path that leads to an experience totally unfabricated.

That's the part of the equation you have to take on faith. You haven't reached awakening. You haven't experienced anything that's really unfabricated. Of course, scientists looking at you from outside would say, "Oh, that's impossible. Human beings can't experience anything that's uncaused." But the Buddha says that he's had the experience himself, and he's a reliable sort of person. And even better, he says, "This is how you do it." This is how you look at your experience directly and deal with it directly so as to find the unfabricated.

Take the body as your field from within. When you breathe in and out, what is it like when you try to make yourself aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out? You find there's the movement of the breath, but there are also other movements as well. There's the movement of the liquid in the body, and often we confuse the two. When there's a lot of pressure, say in the chest or the head, it's not so much that the breath is flowing. We're making the blood flow as well. Of course, the liquid part of the body running up against the solid parts creates pressure, so you have to look at your perception of what's happening, to see where it's causing confusion.

Your breath actually flows very freely. Blood doesn't flow quite so freely because it runs up against obstacles. This is why, when you try to direct the breath energy to different parts of the body, it's not something

you push or squeeze. It's more a matter of mentally going down through your sense of your arms and through your sense of your legs and your torso and your head and wherever you notice there's any tension, you just allow it to relax. That's all you have to do. You just allow the relaxing. The breath will do the flowing. So you have to be very still. Once things are relaxed, you just maintain that sense of being open and relaxed.

I remember when I first went to Thailand, Ajaan Fuang would talk about working with the breath energy, allowing it to flow here, allowing it to flow there, and people seemed to pick up immediately on what he was talking about. For me, though, it was totally foreign. It took a while to just sit with the breath and gain a sense of what he was talking about. I realized that these flows of energy were already happening all the time. It's just that I'd been squeezing them and doing other things unconsciously—fabricating them in a lot of ignorance. The result was that I was left with headaches, and aches in different parts of the body.

So learn to sit with the breath for a while, and just think that the breath can do the work. If you push things, you're pushing the blood, and that's going to create problems. But if you think of the breath as being able to penetrate even the most solid parts of the body, that takes a lot of the pressure off and then you can start investigating: "When I breathe in, which direction does the breath seem to flow most readily? Does it flow up or does it flow down? Am I making it flow up?" Sometimes it's good to have the breath energy coming up to the head, especially after a meal, when all the blood seems to settle down in the stomach and your brain is deprived. Other times, though, if the energy is coming up as you breathe in, it's going to give you a headache.

Hakuin, the Zen monk, talked about suffering from Zen sickness, which is basically a problem of the upflowing energy in the body being too strong and getting stuck in the head. To counteract it, he would visualize a big ball of butter on top of his head, melting and coming down, down, down so that there was a sense of downflowing energy, even as he breathed in; even as he breathed out.

So see what kind of perception you can hold in mind that will help bring things back into balance. If you can't figure anything out, just sit and watch for a while. Allow the breath to come back to its own equilibrium.

What we're doing is sensitizing ourselves to this inner dimension because it's right here that we're going to see all the important issues in the practice. When the Buddha defines the suffering that we're trying to overcome, he talks about form – notice he doesn't say "body," he says "form." But when he defines form it's basically these elements, these four properties – how you experience the body from within. When he talks about mental properties, he's not talking about electrons moving around through your nervous system. He's talking about how you sense mental processes from within. There are feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. There are your perceptions, the labels you have for things. There are thought fabrications, the thoughts you put together, the intentions you have. Then there's your consciousness of all this.

When he uses these terms, he's talking about right here. And he wants you to look at how you're creating suffering out of these things right here. The word he uses for the essential part of suffering is *upadana*, which can mean clinging. It can also mean taking nourishment. You're feeding off these things. You're trying to feed off your feelings, your perceptions, your fabrications, your sense of the body inside. So you want to look into this. Exactly what are you feeding? What is this activity of feeding? It's happening. The question is, how do you catch yourself doing this? You've got to make the mind really still and you begin to notice how you feed in different ways.

One is just taking sensual pleasures out of things: liking to think about this beautiful sight or that nice smell or this nice sound, the food you had today, the food you're going to have tomorrow. That's one way of feeding. You also have certain ideas that things should be done in certain ways. That's another type of feeding. You feed off your particular sense of self. Okay, which parts of the body do you tend to identify with? Where do you think you are right now in the body? Is the body in your awareness? Is your awareness in the body? What's going on? And you find that you tend to repeat certain ideas again and again and again because you get a sense of nourishment out of them. The mindless repeating: That's the clinging. You've got views about all kinds of things, not just about who you are, but all kinds of things. This should be that. That should be this. If you hold onto these things in an unskillful way, you're going to suffer.

But if you approach them with the question, “Where is the stress here? How can I comprehend the stress to the point where I can let it go? What qualities of the mind do I want to develop? Can I develop them?” — those questions will make it easier to let go. That’s bringing the four noble truths, that’s bringing knowledge, to the process of fabrication.

For example, we’re sitting right here; we take this sense of the body, which can be pretty painful sometimes, and we learn how to work with it. We learn how to fabricate it in new ways, ways that give rise to a sense of ease and well-being. We work on what the Buddha calls verbal fabrications – directing our thoughts to certain things, and evaluating them so we bring awareness to the breath, to the way the mind relates to the breath. Then we have perceptions and feelings. Those are the factors that fabricate the mind. What kind of perceptions are we going to bring to this process of being right here so that we can create feelings of well-being that can sustain us?

These are all things that you can experience right here from within. It’s simply a matter of wanting to sensitize yourself to this area of your awareness. The *ajans* in Thailand talk about making your body the path; making your breath the path. This is how you do it. You’re focusing on this part of your awareness and learning how to engage with it with knowledge, with skill. The word for “ignorance” in Pali, *avijja*, literally means lack of skill. The Buddha’s teaching us how to be more skillful in how we approach our awareness from within, so we can solve the problem of suffering from within—not pinning our hopes on somebody outside, whether a priest or a doctor or whatever. The problem lies simply in learning how to gain a sense of what the Buddha’s talking about. You learn how to use his concepts so that the way you deal with events coming from within gets more and more skillful, becomes a path to something that’s not fabricated at all.

The texts talk about touching the Dhamma with the body, or seeing the Dhamma with the body. This is where you see it and touch it. It’s not like it’s a physical object you’re going to touch. It’s a dimension that’s going to be experienced right here where you’re experiencing your body. But it’s a different dimension. It’s strange. It’s here, but it’s a different dimension. Language begins to break down here because, after all, language is a fabrication, and this is something unfabricated.

Language operates in space and time. This is something that's not in space and time, but it can be touched here.

So this is where all your attention should be. Learn to how to get more and more familiar with this place. It's like knowing you're going to be mugged at a certain street corner if you're not careful. So you go down and you check out the street corner and you figure out, "Okay, who's going to mug me and where are the escape routes?" If you're really familiar with the spot, then nobody can catch you.

If you really get familiar with your awareness as you sense it from within, suffering can't catch you because you're not creating it. You've learned how to see through your old habits, the things you did again and again and again, simply out of force of habit without noticing the stress and suffering they were causing. The Buddha says to look at that stress and suffering so that you can see that your old habits really do need to be changed. Then he gives you the vocabulary and the concepts that help you change those habits effectively.

It's all right here. Each of us has his or her own "right here." It's the "right here" that you're responsible for.