

In Terms of the Four Noble Truths

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The Buddha once said that there's no one internal quality more useful for awakening than appropriate attention: asking the right questions, looking at things in the right light. And appropriate attention essentially comes down to seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. And the truths here are not issues of just saying, "Well, there is suffering, there is the cause, there is cessation, there is a path." It's expressed in this way: "*This* is suffering." In other words, you look directly at what suffering is or what stress is. You try to identify in your immediate experience what the cause of suffering is. *This* is the cause of suffering, the origination of suffering, what arises together with suffering. *This* is cessation. *This* is the path. In other words, you look for these things in your direct experience. This is the framework of questions you bring to the direct experience—where is the stress? Oh, it's right here. Where is the cause? It's right here too, but you have to look closely to find it.

When you're looking in this way, you try to apply the duties appropriate to each of these experiences. When you experience stress, you try to comprehend it. Comprehending means knowing it so well that you develop dispassion for it. When you can identify the cause of stress, or the origination of stress, the duty is to abandon it. The cessation of stress, which is dispassion for the cause, that's something you want to witness, to see for yourself: *sacchikaatabbam*. And finally the elements in your experience you can identify as path are things you want to develop. You want to nurture them, strengthen them, bring them, as they say, to the culmination of their development.

As the Buddha points out, while you're engaged in this project, issues of self and not self, and ultimately even being and not being, are irrelevant. You try to look at experience purely in these terms, the terms of stress and the other Four Noble Truths. Questions of, "Do I exist? Do I not exist? What will I be? What have I been?" Those all fall to the wayside. You try to develop the factors of the path, in particular, Right View, Right Mindfulness, and Right Effort, to bring the mind to a state of Right Concentration so that you can comprehend stress. One way this works is when the mind is really concentrated and then you leave concentration, it's useful to ask yourself, "Where is the stress coming in? As soon as I leave concentration, what additional stress is there?"

That's one way of developing dispassion for those forms of stress outside of the concentration: attachment to the body, to feelings, perceptions, ideas, even attachment to sensory consciousness. You want to notice that when you leave concentration, these things get heavier, more burdensome. The stories you build around them, the sense of who you are that you build around them, the sense of the world that you build around them, all of which is called becoming: It becomes a burden. It becomes, to use Ajaan Mahaboowa's phrase, a squeeze on the heart. And you want to see that, you want to appreciate that, detect it every time it happens so you can really comprehend the stress and suffering. In other words, really develop a sense of dispassion for it.

So that's developing the path for the purpose of comprehending suffering.

And then as you comprehend it, in the act of comprehending it, you start letting go of the cause. You feel dispassion for the craving that leads you there, and you want to witness that dispassion—for that makes you more and more willing to look at even subtler levels of stress. You've seen the pattern in operation that when you let go of the cause, you really do experience great relief, a sense of more spacious well-being. And ultimately when you've taken care of all your attachments outside of concentration, that's when you turn on the concentration itself.

Ajaan Mun has an interesting teaching. He says there comes a point in the practice where all four noble truths turn back into one. Everything is to be let go. Everything is to be comprehended to a point of dispassion, so you let go even of the path itself. For you see that even in concentration there is an element of stress. There is inconstancy, stress, a fluctuation in it, because it's conditioned. And when you develop dispassion for that, you totally let go. And because your passion for doing it was what kept it going, in the letting go that also brings about cessation.

Everybody wants to know what happens after cessation. Well, there's no after cessation. What's left, what's not left, it's called objectifying non-objectification. Because with cessation, there's another dimension, which is outside of space and time. And outside of space and time, there's no after. There is no left over or not left over. Even the concepts of existence and nonexistence don't apply.

There's a passage where the Buddha is talking to Kaccayana Gotta. Kaccayana Gotta has asked him what really is Right View, and the Buddha gives the subtlest of all of his definitions of Right View. When you are simply watching stress arise, the idea of nonexistence doesn't occur to you. As you watch stress pass away, the idea of existence doesn't occur to you. You put your mind into a position of simply watching stress arising, stress passing away. At that point, the concept of being, like a being, *satta*, doesn't occur. Notions of existence and nonexistence don't occur. And in that state of mind, the idea of whether a self would exist or not exist is totally irrelevant.

It's not one of the issues you're meant to ask when you are dealing in the subtlest level of Right View. You're simply meant to ask, is this stress? Yes. This is stress arising and passing away. Anything that you see arising and passing away, you learn to see it all as stress. That of course would include the path. And at that point, in Ajaan Mun's phrase, when all the four noble truths become one, everything gets let go. The motivation for wanting to do this is the Buddha's statement that fruition is the ultimate happiness. And as Ajaan Suwat once said, once you attain ultimate happiness, you don't care whether there is existence or nonexistence, or if there is somebody there, or nobody there. Those issues are all irrelevant. Because existence and nonexistence basically have meaning in the context where there's still suffering. We cling to the question of the existence or nonexistence of a self because we hope the answer to the question will lead us away from suffering to true happiness. But when the true happiness has been attained and realized, those concepts are no longer relevant.

There's a passage where the Buddha once said that belief in annihilationism is the highest of all wrong views, because it helps lead toward dispassion. But we don't want to hold on to the highest of wrong views. We want to hold on to right view, which rephrases all the questions in terms of the four noble truths, and has you look simply at, "Right now, where is there stress?" When you can identify it,

try to comprehend it. Develop whatever qualities are needed to comprehend it. And as you comprehend it, you develop the kind of knowledge that leads to dispassion. You realize you don't want to continue creating this and feeding it. As you stop the process of feeding it, the suffering disbands. That's all that really matters.

For as the Buddha said, all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering, stress and the end of stress. And it's all an issue of doing. Suffering is something you cause, through the activity of the mind. The path to the end of suffering is also something you do, something that takes you to the end of suffering. So the Buddha's not concerned with the whatness of things. He's more concerned with the howness of things, how you do it: how you cause suffering, how you bring it to an end. It takes some major shift of our mental universe to be concerned more and more with the howness, but it's a shift that really pays off.