

# *The Questions of Suffering*

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The Buddha said that when we meet with suffering in life, we tend to have two reactions. One is bewilderment—not understanding why there’s suffering or even what it is, just knowing that we don’t like it. We have no idea where it came from or what we can do about it. That leads to the second reaction, which is a search. The Buddha expresses this search in these words: “Is there somebody out there who knows a way or two to put an end to this suffering?”

The search is where we get into trouble, partly because of the bewilderment. In other words, we don’t really know the answer to our question, or who is qualified to give a good answer. As we go looking outside, we get all kinds of advice. It’s like having a heart condition. Everybody knows what a person with a heart condition should eat and shouldn’t eat. And they’ll tell you. I’ve learned since I had my heart condition that there’s only one thing that everybody agrees on, which is that water is good for me. Everything else has its adherents and its opponents. And that’s just for a simple thing like a heaviness in your physical heart.

Think, not in terms of the physical heart, but of your mental heart, the mind—in Buddhism, they treat the heart and the mind as basically the same thing: For the problems of the mind, people offer even more conflicting solutions. It’s very rare that they actually point back to that first issue: What is the suffering? How do you put an end to that suffering? They’ll find other issues, saying that to deal with this aspect of your personality, you have to believe this or you have to give faith to that, you have to get into a right relationship with this being or cosmic principle, or whatever. Very few answers actually point back to the original problem, which is: There is suffering and we’re causing it. We have to understand what it is: to look straight at it and say, okay, this is *the* problem, and what are we going to do about it? That’s the approach the Buddha offers.

Sometimes you hear the first noble truth expressed as “life is suffering,” but the Buddha never said that. He gives a long list of things that count as suffering. There’s birth, aging, illness, death, being separated from what you love, being together with what you don’t love, not getting what you want, and then a long line of miserable emotions: despair, pain, distress, grief. All these things are suffering. But he’s not really giving a definition. It’s a collection: different instances of suffering, and the purpose of the collection is so that you can identify in yourself what he’s talking about. You can probably recognize your suffering somewhere there in the list. You know he’s talking about something familiar to you.

But then the Buddha says something really interesting. Five clinging-aggregates: That's the essence of suffering. That doesn't sound so familiar. If you go in the street and ask people, "How are your aggregates?" they'll think, "Are you talking about the gravel in my driveway?" It's not a term people are familiar with. But it's something we're doing all the time. The Buddha defines each aggregate in terms of an action, and they're actions we're doing all the time.

Form, he says, deforms. Feelings feel. Perceptions perceive. Fabrications fabricate thoughts, and consciousness cognizes. These are activities, and we cling to them, which means we try to get our sustenance out of them. We try to feed off of these things. That's why we suffer.

How do you feed off feelings? You want pleasant feelings. Whatever sensation comes in, you grab onto it and try to squeeze whatever pleasure you can out of it, like squeezing honey out of a piece of honeycomb. You slurp it right up. Some sensations offer pleasure, but when you get used to just grabbing sensations as they come along, you find yourself grabbing painful ones, too. When you try to squeeze pleasure out of the pain, you suffer. Or if you try to squeeze pleasure out of old pleasures, you suffer because they don't offer honey any more. Instead, what they offer can be quite bitter.

With perceptions, we tend to identify with our views about things. "This has to be this and that has to be that." We can build all kinds of identities around this. This is where a lot of us go wrong. There's that belief that if you believe something, if you see something in a particular way, then you're better than other people. Even though in the Buddha's teaching there is such a thing as right view and right perception, and we do hold on to these things for the purpose of the path, still it's not because they make us better than anybody else. They help us in going back and dealing with that original problem: the problem of suffering.

Thought fabrications, consciousness: When everything else seems to fail us, we hold onto the act of consciousness, thinking, "Just the knowing I, that's me." You want to *be* the knowing. That seems to be the thread that ties everything together. And yet, when you look at acts of consciousness, they come and go. Your consciousness of things that were happening five minutes ago: Where is that now? It's a memory. It's not consciousness anymore. It's perception. That particular consciousness is gone. And yet we try to build an identity out of these momentary acts. It's like building a huge heavy building on very rickety foundations.

The Buddha's approach for putting an end to suffering is not that you stop doing these activities. You learn how to do them more skillfully, particularly the act of fabrication. This, he says, lies in every one of the aggregates. You've got a potential coming in from past karma—a potential for a feeling, a potential for a

perception, and so forth—and you take that and form it into an actual experience, an actual aggregate. There’s an element of intention in each one, which means you can do things with these aggregates by changing your intentions.

You don’t just accept what comes. You have to realize you’re shaping these things as they come. Just to accept things, to be okay with whatever, to be non-reactive: The Buddha says that’s the lowest level of equanimity. He calls it “house based equanimity,” where you just learn how to be patient and endure and try not to be reactive as things come and go, whether they’re pleasant sounds or unpleasant sounds; pleasant sights or unpleasant sights. Trying to keep the mind non-reactive: That’s the lowest level of equanimity.

The higher level of equanimity is when you bring the mind into concentration. This is where you begin to see that there is an element of intention even in your feelings. Just stay with your breath for a while. Stay with it continually and you find that the breath smooths out. It gets more comfortable. That right there shows you’re not just dealing with total givens. You’re dealing with potentials that you’re shaping. In this case, you shape a feeling by the act of constant alertness.

So when we give you meditation instructions, we’re giving instructions in how to shape things in a more skillful way. You’re going to take all of these aggregates and you’re going to turn them into a path, which is very different from just accepting what comes. The views that we hold to as we do this: They’re instructions on how to do this skillfully.

Remember: You’re here to solve the problem of your suffering. The views are not for any other purpose. We’re not trying to win out over other people or show that we’re better than they are or smarter than they are. We’re doing this because we’re suffering. Now, we’ll be happy to share what we’ve learned with other people, but there are times when other people are not receptive. They’ve got their other agendas; their other issues. In cases like that, you just have to let them go, because you’ve still got your problem: There’s part of the mind that’s feeding on something in an unskillful way. You’ve got to find out where that is and what you can do to put a stop to it, because this is a problem that nobody else can solve for you. When the Buddha talks about the causes of suffering, he has his short answer, which is three kinds of craving. His long answer is dependent co-arising. But in either case, the causes of suffering are inside.

Suffering is something you feel. Other people can sympathize with you. They can see that you’re suffering about something, but they can’t actually feel your suffering. And it turns out that the actions causing that suffering are on that same level of awareness, the level that you don’t share with anybody else. It’s not because

you don't want to share it. It's simply that you can't. You can't take your experience of suffering out and share it with other people. You can tell them about it, but the actual feeling, the actual sensation, is something only you can know.

Fortunately, the problem can be solved from within as well. These same clinging-aggregates that are suffering, and the craving that causes the clinging to these actions, can be counteracted with actions you develop inside, too. In other words, you use other aggregates: different perceptions; different thought fabrications. You learn how to perceive the breath continually. You direct your thoughts to the breath. You evaluate the breath—that's fabrication—so that you can create a feeling of well-being. The breath feels smooth, silken, diffuse throughout the body, energizing the body, nourishing the body. The sense of the body from within changes because you've changed your intention. You've developed new skills in how to deal with these things right here, right now.

What you've done is that you've taken these things that are suffering if you cling to them in the wrong way and now you do something new with them. You turn them into a path. Again, you do this not to be better than anybody else, but simply because you want an answer to that question, "Who knows a way to put an end to suffering?" The Buddha's got this answer for you.

When you try it, you find that it works. And in so doing, you also cure that problem of bewilderment. You begin to see: This is why there's suffering, and this is how you can change things inside—change your intentions; change what you're paying attention to; change your perceptions. Where there once was suffering, now there's a sense of well-being.

The more you stick with this, the deeper the sense of well-being grows. The more precise you are in seeing where there are subtle levels of suffering or stress that you didn't notice before, where you wouldn't really say that it was suffering, but there is stress. There's a sense of disturbance in the mind. You want to look into that. What's still disturbing the mind? What's still causing it to waver, to feel burdened? As you pursue these questions, the bewilderment goes away. There comes a point where you don't need anyone outside to give you the answers. You know the answer yourself. There is a way to end suffering and it's right in here.

There's also a dimension in here that lies beyond the reach of any kind of suffering. When you've found that, you realize you found something amazing and that the Buddha knew what he was talking about: There is an end to suffering and this is the path. This is how to do it. You also understand what all the suffering was. All the four noble truths become clear. And you see why they're called "right view." They form the view that's right for solving that original problem.

So when questions come up in your mind, remember that the really important ones are those that relate to this question: What is the suffering? What causes it? What can be done to put an end to it? That original question branches out and becomes the framework for the four noble truths. Those are the questions that are really worth pursuing.

But again, this is a judgment that we have to arrive at for ourselves. It may be true that everyone wants happiness, most people have other agendas as well. They'll say that before you take care of the problem of happiness, you've got to take care of the problem over here: this political problem or that social problem. There's only so much you can do to help them see that the Buddha's explanation, and his sense of priorities, are really helpful. There's only so much time you can spend on other people's opinions.

What you've got to focus on is what you're doing to put an end to your suffering, because no one else can do this for you. And it doesn't get easier as you get older. So do what you can now. Don't let the time pass without something to show for it.