

Four Noble Questions

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Ignorance is a very particular kind of delusion. Delusion in general is simply having wrong ideas about things: thinking that what's right is wrong or what's wrong is right. That can be very general. The ignorance that the Buddha says is the cause of suffering is a particular kind of delusion, in that it's focused on the issues of suffering: not knowing suffering, not knowing its cause, not knowing its cessation, and not knowing the path to its cessation. We might think, "I've learned those things. I've heard them, so I know them." But there are levels of knowing. There's the knowing that comes from hearing, there's the knowing that comes from thinking things through, and then there's the knowing that comes from actually putting things into practice. The last kind of knowing is what really puts an end to ignorance, because it's a special kind of knowing. You see things happening in the mind, you can understand what can be done with them, and you do it.

We talk about applying the four noble truths to our experience. It's not that we go around with the terms in our mind. Instead, to see things in these terms starts out with a series of questions—you might call them the four noble questions: What is the suffering here, right in this experience right now? What's causing it? What would its cessation be? And what's the path to that cessation? You may not even think specifically in those terms. Instead, you might say, "What's wrong

here? What can I do about it?" That's the beginning point for seeing things in terms of the four noble truths.

So when you see suffering, what can you do about it? The first thing to do about it is to look for the cause.

Years back, when I was still a lay person teaching English at Chiang Mai University, I taught a composition class to a group of social science majors. We focused on problem-solving compositions, where you point out a problem, figure out the cause, and then propose an end to the problem by attacking the cause. We started out with advertisements. "Are you unattractive and nobody likes you? Maybe you're wearing the wrong clothes"—that kind of thing. From there we moved up gradually to social problems. But as I kept saying to the students all along, this approach is based on the four noble truths. It's nothing particularly Western. It's very Buddhist.

What makes the four noble truths special as a problem-solving approach is that they focus on the big problem in life: the unnecessary suffering we cause ourselves. This means that, in focusing on these truths, the Buddha is not simply setting out general problem-solving principles, or telling us some interesting facts about suffering. He's saying that suffering is the problem that requires our primary attention.

Many of us will agree with him there, but then he goes on to analyze the problem in ways that many of us might not agree with right off the bat. It's only when we put his approach into practice that we begin to see how right it is: that this is *the* big problem, and that his analysis is spot on. Until that point, we can have so many other agendas that we think are more important—

in terms of our relationships, our jobs, our plans for our lives, our basic set of values. These can get in the way of seeing that suffering is the big problem.

So this is a value judgement on the Buddha's part. This is *the* problem to focus on: the suffering you're causing yourself. That's the big problem. You can focus on all the problems that are being created out there in the world, but we suffer from them simply because we approach them in the wrong way. If we changed the way we approach our inner sufferings, we wouldn't have to suffer from things outside.

So the issue is right here with our awareness, right here with our mind. In this way, the four noble truths move from just a general problem-solving approach to a problem-solving approach focused on suffering, and then they get more specific about what the suffering is.

The Buddha, in explaining these truths, makes some unexpected moves, as when he describes suffering itself. He starts with a long list of different things that we're all familiar with in terms of the pain they cause, but then he says the common thread among them is the five clinging-aggregates, an observation not all that immediately apparent. But we take his guideline here. When you ask yourself what's the suffering right now, where's the stress, he tells you to look right there, at the five clinging-aggregates, so that you're not just casting around and having to reinvent the Dhamma wheel every time you ask the question.

How are you going to see these aggregates? When you develop the path. That's why we're doing concentration here,

practicing mindfulness and concentration to be steadily here in the present moment so that we can watch things right as they're happening. Because the Buddha's word for the cause of suffering is interesting. It's not *hetu*, the usual word for "cause" in Pali. Instead, it's *samudaya*, which means something that arises at the same time. That's what we're looking for. Wherever there's a disturbance in the mind, you want to look for what happens at the same time. When that disturbance passes away, what passes away at the same time? The two are connected.

If you want to see the events of the mind, how they contribute to added stress, you need to have a firm baseline, getting the mind as still as possible. If your baseline wobbles, you won't see these things, because a lot of them are very subtle. So you just stay there steadily alert at the same time that you're questioning: Ok, what's going to happen? When is the stress going to arise?

Some of the forest Ajaans compare this to being a hunter. The hunter has to be very still. He goes to the spot in the forest where the animals he wants tend to go. He has to sit there very still, but at the same time very alert. If he's not still, he won't hear them coming. If he's not alert, they can pass right under his nose and he won't see them. This kind of proper balance between stillness and alertness is what allows you to see these things in the mind. The more stillness there is, the subtler the things you'll be able to see.

So in this case, doing the concentration is, again, applying the four noble truths. What should you be doing right now? The answer is: concentration. You realize that concentration is something good to do. It should be done; it's something to be

developed. Right there you're getting into those four noble questions. The mind settles down. What do you do with it? You try to develop that quality of being settled down.

And then you watch.

It's like being a spider on a web. The spider is another kind of hunter. In this case, the spider has to be very attuned to the web. With any slight vibration in the web, it recognizes a likely suspect and goes to search it out. When it sees that it's got what it wants on the web, it spins a little web-strand around it and then goes back to its original spot. In the same way, you want to get the mind really still and then watch. Be sensitive to any changes that occur in the body or the mind. You may see that there's a kind of a stirring occurring in the area that's hard to identify either as being either physical or mental. It's at the meeting place between the two. They'll be a stirring. The mind has the choice of how it's going to identify that as something physical or as something mental.

So you take advantage of that choice and say, "I'm going to identify that as physical right now and breathe through it." That way, you nip a lot of thoughts in the bud. Otherwise, if you identify the stirring as a mental event, then it becomes a thought. A thought about what? Well, it could be a thought about tomorrow's meal, it could be about where you're going next week, it could be about the events of the past few days – all kinds of things. It's your choice: what kind of label to slap on it so that you can run with it. But you're here not to develop things in that direction, you're here to develop concentration. So instead, you want to zap those thoughts.

This is where those four noble questions are really useful because there's a duty that goes with each. Suffering is to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed. Our problem is that we get the duties mixed up. We tend to develop our craving and to abandon the path. That doesn't help much with anything at all.

There's a story about Chao Khun Nor, a famous meditating monk in Bangkok. He was doing walking meditation outside his hut one night, and a young monk came up and asked for some help. He was being pestered by thoughts that he just couldn't let go. His mind kept going to those thoughts again and again. It really had him worried. Chao Khun Nor looked at him and said, "You're doing the wrong duty." And then he went into his hut.

Fortunately, the young monk had read about the four noble truths and their duties. He realized he was developing the cause of suffering and abandoning the path. What he had to do was switch things around and try to develop the path, this stillness of mind.

So keep with it. The question often comes up, "What do I do when I'm bored?" Well, you let the boredom go. You don't identify with the boredom. You don't develop the boredom—which is something we've been really good at since we were teenagers. You try to develop the path instead. You realize that the boredom is not there as your friend.

Ajaan Suwat used to say that we see suffering as our enemy and craving as our friend. We've got the roles backwards. Craving is the enemy. And suffering, if we really get to know it well, will teach us a lot of really useful things, so we have to be on good

terms with it. Not that we're planning to settle down and live with it forever, but we're not going to be able to get past it until we know it really well. So see it as an opportunity.

And see the path as your opportunity for getting past it. Sometimes there are certain sufferings that we really identify with, some sufferings we feel have a moral value. Those are the ones that are really hard to let go, such as getting over the grief over someone we've lost. You feel that if you don't suffer over them, you're being disloyal. But as the Buddha said, that's not the case. You can still be loyal to that person and not suffer from the grief. Try to be able to make that distinction. This again is where it comes down to a question of values. We're asking those four noble questions to arrive at the four noble truths. In other words, there are useful answers to the questions, answers that can make a huge difference in our hearts, so we're putting the questions first.

Sometimes the answers are not what you expect to begin with, so a part of the mind is going to resist. This is where you have to have faith that the Buddha really knew what he was talking about. It's a faith that's genuinely confirmed only with stream entry, but in the meantime, you begin to get some hints of its truth at the points where you really do arrive at the right answers to those four noble questions.

What is the suffering right now? What is the cause? What is the path? You start with the general framework set out by those questions, and then you move in. And remember, it's not just the framework, it's also the set of values: that this is *the* big problem. The mind resists that? Then dig that resistance up, look at it, and

decide: Do you want to keep siding with it? Or do you want to side with the Buddha's questions? It's when you think in these terms that you start developing your concentration into right concentration as the Buddha defines it: concentration endowed with all other factors of the path.

That may sound like a lot of busyness, like a mother chicken who's trying to gather in this chick here and this chick here. It starts to get them under its wings and whoops! That chick has run out. You've got to run out to catch it and whoops! the other chicks have gone. But then what happens is, as you gradually gather the mind into stillness, and you've got the right questions, everything else starts to fall into place. What matters is that you have trust in the Buddha that these really are the right questions to ask.

And then test them yourself: Do they lead to a noble attainment? That's what makes the questions noble; that's what makes the truths noble. They lead the mind to a state that's noble in a very high dimension.