

A Mystery & a Puzzle

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There are two kinds of problems in the world: puzzles and mysteries. A puzzle is when you don't have enough facts. There's missing information and you've got to find it. Sometimes it comes down to just a few simple facts and everything falls together. The other kind of problem, a mystery, is when you have too much information. You're flooded with data and you can't figure it out. The solution lies in trying to pare things down, to figure out which facts are important, and which ones are not.

So the question is, is suffering a puzzle or is it a mystery? It's a little bit of both, more of a mystery than a puzzle, because suffering is there all the time for us to see, whether it's blatant or subtle. There's always something burdening the mind. The question is why? All of the data are right here: issues in the body, issues in the mind. The Buddha said, it comes down to the issue of fabrication, how we put things together, and that's happening all of the time. Every moment has its element of intention. We're not just passive observers. We consciously or unconsciously create a lot of our experience. We're already filtering things out, deciding what to focus on. The reason we suffer is because we're focusing on the wrong things. That indicates that the problem of suffering is a mystery.

To solve a mystery you need some general frameworks, and that is what the Buddha provides with his teachings, specifically the teachings on the four noble truths, which are not just data that you feed into the computer; they're a way of looking at things. They point you to what's important. To begin with, they point you to the fact that suffering is an important problem. Second, they point you to where to look for the cause, which is here in the mind: unskillful desires. These things are happening almost all the time, but there are also skillful desires, which are part of the path to the end of suffering. You have to learn how to separate the two.

The desire to follow the path is a skillful desire. The desire to figure out the problem of suffering is a skillful desire. That's the kind of desire you want to encourage. As for the end of suffering, that's the part you haven't experienced yet. If you learn how to look at what you're doing, what you're experiencing in terms of those other three truths, ultimately the truth of cessation will appear. So this means you have to learn how to ignore a lot of things that are irrelevant and focus instead on things that you may have passed over in the past to solve this mystery of suffering. Why is it that every action we do is for the sake of happiness, and yet we cause so much suffering? That really is a mystery.

The puzzle part of all this is that there are some events going on in the mind that we haven't really noticed. In that flood of information, there are a few details that we've been overlooking, because most of our attention is focused outside: on things we like, things we don't like, things we're afraid of, things we hope for. It's as if we have a camera that's permanently focused outside. It's never going to take any pictures inside. As a result, what's going on inside the camera doesn't get on the film. No matter in which direction you point the camera, what's inside the camera doesn't get recorded. So we have to learn how to change our focus. This is why we meditate. We want to get used to being right here at the

breath, so that ultimately we can shift our focus inside where we can see the movements of the mind.

Luang Pu Dune, one of the forest ajaans, once said that the whole problem of suffering is the mind going out, flowing out: That's the cause of suffering. To counteract the cause, we have to bring the mind back in to look at what it's doing. The flowing of the mind is like an arrow pointing outside all of the time. We let ourselves get fooled by the arrow. It points out there, so we look out. It's like that old game in high school where a group of people would stand in the hallway and stare up at the ceiling, to see how many other people they could fool into staring up at the ceiling as well. What you've got to do is just learn how to look at the arrow and not let your eyes follow it out—like walking up to those people in the hallway and, instead of looking at the ceiling, staring right at them. After a while they get embarrassed.

So here we are, looking inside, trying to apply the Buddha's framework to what we see, sorting out what is a skillful desire right now. In the beginning, it's pretty simple: just stay with the breath. The desire to do that is skillful. If you find the mind wandering off in other directions, pull it right back, for the other directions are not where you want to be at the moment. In the course of doing this, you begin to see some of the tricks it plays on itself in the process of wandering off. You have to learn how to see through them. It's going to keep pointing its arrows, but again instead of following the arrows out to look outside, just look at the arrows and point them aside. Get back to the breath. Get really used to being here.

A while back someone complained that he had been meditating for many years, and he was still focused on his breath. He was wondering if he was ever going to get to the four noble truths. Actually, though, focusing on the breath is part of the four noble truths. You're developing the path. You want to be right here all of the time, because this is where you're going to see things. The breath is where the mind and the body meet. All of the issues that are going to come up in the meditation will come up right here.

So you want to be firmly planted here. Get used to taking this as your basic stance, as your basic focus. To use an image from another one of the ajaans, you're cooking the mind, like cooking a vegetable. If a vegetable is still raw and in the ground, it can grow. Once it's cooked, it can't grow anymore. It's the normal habit of fabrication to go out and grow lots of issues dealing with the world outside. But you want to cook those fabrications so they don't grow anymore. They just stop. What you have then are the fabrications surrounding what's going on in the present moment: the creation of concentration, the questioning that gives rise to discernment, all of the fabrications that make up the path.

You want to approach these in a skillful way as well, because there are unskillful ways of working the path. For instance, there's the whole question of contentment and discontent. On the one hand, you want to be content with your physical requisites, your physical situation. If you have only a few clothes in your closet, that's really plenty. All you need is one set to cover the body, one set for the winter, and a set for the summer. Anything beyond that is excess. Excess doesn't just take up space; it also takes up your time. You've got to look after these things. Once you buy something, you're suddenly responsible for it. So learn to see that not having a lot of stuff is actually a good thing. It's especially good for the mind. Your affairs are a lot lighter. If you have to pick up and move all of a sudden, you wouldn't have lots of stuff to drag around. Once you've learned to get along on just a few things, you can move around anywhere at all. So with regard to things outside, you have to learn a certain level of contentment.

With regard to things inside, though, the Buddha said that one of the secrets of his Awakening is that he never allowed himself to stay content with where he was. We have to

understand this carefully. It doesn't mean that he was always trying to move on to the next thing, the next thing, the next thing, because as he recommends himself, when you attain a certain level of concentration, you have to learn how to indulge in it. You have to stick there, stay there, enjoy it, get to know it well. If you're in too great a hurry to move on to the next thing, the next level of concentration, you lose your foundation. What this means is that you learn how to enjoy the concentration, all the while knowing in the back of your mind that at some point you're going to have to outgrow it. So as long as you're not complacent, and you don't misunderstand what's happening, you're okay, because you really need to work on establishing this foundation. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, you want to be crazy about the meditation if you want to do it well. Make it into something that you always want to be doing.

Even as you're going around the monastery, cleaning things up, taking care of things, whatever the jobs you have around here: Don't abandon the breath. Stick with the breath. See where your mind is, what you can learn about the mind even as you're engaged in other activities. This way the meditation has a chance to grow, even as we deal with our other responsibilities. We don't want the monastery to become so much of a burden that it gets in the way of the meditation, but a lot of this has to do with your attitude. It is possible to stay with the breath as you wash the dishes, as you fix the food, as you sweep up, look after the orchard. Always keep the meditation cooking on the back burner, because sometimes the little details that you want to see, the puzzle parts, will appear while you're doing something else. See the connection between the movement of the mind and the suffering or the stress that it causes. Those connections: Those are the puzzle pieces that are still missing. Sometimes you see them when you're not looking straight at them, out of the corner of your eye.

So always keep it in mind, that this is the issue: There are certain movements of the mind that you haven't noticed. They're right here. This is why suffering is a mystery: Its causes are happening right here all the time and you're not looking at them. You don't see them.

The Buddha gives you the framework for looking at things. The question of what's skillful, what's unskillful: This underlies everything. The teachings start with the precepts, so that you get a sense of what's skillful and unskillful at a blatant level. You learn how to deal with the issue of noticing when you've done something unskillful. You learn to make the resolve not to repeat the mistake, without getting tangled up in remorse. You realize that all that can be asked of a human being is that you don't repeat the mistakes that you've clearly seen that you've done. You try to develop the proper attitude that helps keep you from harming yourself and harming others. In other words, you develop this attitude of goodwill for all beings, yourself included. This is how you get the right attitude toward your mistakes, realizing that we have all made mistakes, but we can all learn. You don't want to be constantly standing on your pride, saying, "Well, whatever I do has to be good." That doesn't get you anywhere. At the same time, though, you don't want to be the sort of person who feels that you're a miserable failure with no hope at all. That doesn't accomplish anything either.

So when you are dealing with the precepts, you want to learn the proper attitude toward your actions and their results—the times when you make mistakes, and the times when you do things well. Learn how to derive energy from the things you've done well. Don't regard it as a fluke when you've done something skillful.

Once you've developed the right attitude toward your actions through observing the precepts, you've learned a lot of good skills to help your meditation. You have practice in not denying what you're doing; you're not denying the stress that you're causing yourself.

This is one of the big traps for a meditator, this habit of denial. If you can avoid that trap, the meditation gets a lot easier. You're always ready to learn. You're not embarrassed or ashamed to look at your mistakes. You know how to deal with them confidently.

In this way you open things up in the mind, the possibility of finding those missing puzzle pieces. Exactly where is the mind lacking in alertness? Where is it lacking in mindfulness so that you do things in unskillful ways? You begin to see those connections. Once you've seen them, you don't have to tell yourself to remember them. They stick in your mind. You see them very blatantly, and you learn from them, resolving that you're not going to let yourself be careless in that way again.

So those are the puzzle pieces. It's both a mystery and a puzzle, why we suffer. You have to be the sort of person who, on the one hand, is able to see the big picture of the four noble truths to solve the mystery, and on the other, to look for the details in the movements of the mind to solve the puzzle. Ultimately, the problem of suffering neither is a puzzle nor a mystery, and in that way you learn not to suffer ever again.