

Categorical Truths

May 26, 2022

Make a survey of your body; make a survey of your mind. A survey of the body: Make sure you're sitting up straight in a posture that you can maintain for an hour, and notice where there are patterns of tension. See if you can release the tension.

Notice this especially around the joints. You might start with the joints of the fingers, move up through the hands, the wrists, the elbows, shoulders; and then, with the toes, coming up the feet, the ankles, the knees, the hips, the neck.

Then survey your mind. Notice if you're feeling a lot of energy or not much energy—in other words, seeing in what ways the mind may be out of balance right now. If its thoughts are going any place aside from the present moment, bring them back in.

Then you put these things together—the mind and the body—right at the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body most clearly. For some people, it's around the nose; for other people, it's in the chest or the abdomen. But think of breathing as a whole-body process. It engages the entire nervous system, all the way out to the pores.

If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. You can experiment with the different kinds of breathing: fast, slow; heavy, light; deep, shallow. See what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now, if you can get a sense of what its needs are. If it needs more energy, you might want to try in long and out short; if the energy level's too high, in short and out long. But get a sense of what works for you.

In the practice, there are some teachings the Buddha lays out as categorical teachings. In other words, they're true across the board for everybody. The four noble truths is one of those teachings. As is the basic principle that if anything is unskillful in your thoughts, words, and deeds, you should try to abandon it; if anything is skillful, you should try to encourage it, maintain it, let it grow. These truths are true across the board, all the time, for everyone.

In terms of the four noble truths, the first one is the truth of suffering or stress—*dukkha* is the Pāli term. As the Buddha says, the truth here is basically that your suffering is in the way you cling. You cling to the body, you cling to your feelings, your perceptions, your thought constructs; you cling to consciousness of the senses. Wherever you cling, that's the suffering.

This is called a noble truth because when you understand your suffering in this way, you see that there's something you can do about it in such a way that takes you beyond all suffering. That's what the point of all four noble truths is: When you act on them properly, they lead to a noble goal.

As for the second noble truth, the origination of suffering: Suffering comes from three types of cravings—specifically, craving for sensuality, for becoming (to take on an identity in a world of experience because you have a desire for something in that world of experience), or craving for non-becoming (your desire's been frustrated; that particular mental world or physical world is not satisfying you anymore and you want to get rid of it). All these kinds of craving lead to clinging, so they make you suffer.

The third noble truth is the fact that you can put an end to suffering by putting an end to the clinging. In other words, we don't have to suffer.

And then, the fourth noble truth is the noble eightfold path, which boils down to virtue, concentration, and discernment.

These are all noble truths because they carry duties that, when you fulfill them, will lead to the deathless: something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die; something that stands outside of space and time. All this is categorical.

Now, when you're practicing virtue, practicing concentration, even when you're practicing discernment, different people will encounter different problems. As with concentration, some people will find that the breath is not a conducive topic for them—they want to try something else. There are other topics you can choose, but the breath is the topic that's most universally accessible, so we'll focus on that for right now.

You try to focus on the breath in a way that works—in other words, gets the mind into concentration, where you feel centered, clear, alert, and your different thinkings don't lead you around by the nose. You're in charge of your thoughts.

So, right now, you want to focus on staying with the breath. Any other thoughts that come in right now that are not related to the breath, you just put them aside. In fact, one of the best ways of putting them aside is simply not paying attention to them. If you pay attention to them, they pull you away. So, you're here to hold on to the breath in the midst of these other things that are happening in the mind right now. Remember: If you try to chase them away, they've got you. So, you stay right here.

Try to be sensitive to how the breathing feels. The more sensitive you can be to this, the more it feels nourishing. You can iron out any irregularities in the breath so that it's smooth coming in, smooth going out. xx

As you do this, you're developing good qualities in the mind. When the Buddha says these teachings are categorical, he wants you to be able to confirm that for yourself. And, to confirm that, you need to develop some good qualities in the mind to be a reliable judge.

One of them is mindfulness: the ability to keep something in mind. Like right now—you're trying to remember to stay with the breath.

Alertness: watching what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. As the Buddha said, suffering is something that comes from what we do. If we're going to get past it, we have to be very alert to what we do. So, right now, try to be alert to your desire to stay with the breath, and then see how well it's actually going.

Then there's a third quality: ardency. You try to do this well, which means that, if you've wandered off, away from the breath, you try to come back as quickly as possible; when you're with the breath, you try to be really, really sensitive to how the breathing feels.

Again, think of the breath as a whole-body process. There will be different parts of the body that seem to be more sensitive to the breath than others, so focus on those, and then think of them connecting so that it does feel like it's a whole-body process. And your awareness begins to fill the whole body as well.

As you get sensitive to the breath energies in the body, you notice sometimes, as you breathe in, that the energy seems to be going up; at other times, it seems to be going down. Or you may notice that it seems to be coming in a part of the body that you might not have expected.

So just notice how it's going and, if it feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't feel good, you can think of changing. When you change, you don't put too much physical pressure on the breath. Just change the way you think—change the way you hold the image of the breath in mind—and see what the results are.

As you become more mindful, more alert, and more ardent at what you're doing, you become a better and better judge of i) are you actually doing it right? And ii) are the results satisfactory or not? What the Buddha wants you to do with this quality of ardency is to be really picky about what you're going to be satisfied with.

He says the ultimate goal is something totally free from aging, free from illness, free from death. It's not even known through the six senses; it's something outside. But, it is something you can touch here at the mind. That's a pretty tall order—a very high standard for happiness.

Most of us are willing to be happy with things where we say, “If I put in some effort and I get some results, as long as the results seem to be worth the effort, I’ll be happy.”

But the Buddha says there’s something that is objectively the highest form of happiness, because it doesn’t change and doesn’t disappoint: total freedom. The question is, “Do you want to go all the way?” He was happy to teach people who were not ready to go all the way but who wanted to go at least in the right direction. But, as he kept reminding them, there’s more. There’s better.

He himself said that he gained awakening because he did not rest content with skillful qualities in his mind. That’s an important principle. Sometimes we get into a nice state of concentration and we think, “This must be good enough.” But as long as it can fade and turn on you, why accept it as good enough? If you have a certain insight but you have to keep remembering, remembering, remembering the insight to keep applying it, there must be something better where you don’t have to keep remembering.

The remembering—mindfulness—is something you do as part of the path, but the path does lead someplace beyond the path. The Buddha’s image is of a raft that goes across a river. You take sticks and twigs of this side of the river—in other words, your various ways of putting your experience together—you do it in a way that builds a raft that goes across. Then you swim, using the energy of your arms and legs as you hold on to the raft. Then, when you get to the other side, you can abandon the raft. You don’t need it anymore.

So, it’s important that we not mistake the path for the goal. And that we don’t rest content until we’ve checked to see: Is what the Buddha taught really true? Because it is something that everybody can test for themselves if they’re true enough in the test—if they’re mindful, alert, and ardent in the test, and don’t let themselves get satisfied by halfway measures—that it is possible to put an end to suffering.

The fact that this path leads to the end of suffering: That’s what makes it noble—something you really can depend on. But, to be able to depend on it, first you have to learn how to depend on yourself. That’s what we’re doing as we meditate: developing the skills we need to be dependable judges of what’s going on in the mind—of what’s satisfactory and what’s not satisfactory. But it’s all something human beings can do. So, give it your best.