

Four questions

The Buddha teaches us to ask 4 questions that will change our lives forever. These are the questions we need to ask when something bad, or even when something especially good, happens to us. We will then realize 4 liberating truths that ennoble us into becoming true individuals. Asking these questions and listening to their answers transform us in greater ways than we may think possible. These 4 vital questions are:

(1) Is it true? (2) Why is it true? (3) What do I do about it? (4) What would I be then?¹

Is it really true? Imagine we're watching a movie, one of our favourite shows. One of the characters does something funny. It makes us laugh, or cry, or feel really angry because he does something really stupid. So, we are caught up with all these emotions, which can overwhelm us for the whole day, maybe longer.

The point is that *none of this is happening!* There's nothing moving on the screen: it's just a series of pictures projected to the screen, with lights and sounds. Or the picture on our computer screen is just little dots of red, green and blue (more or less). We have made up all the rest. Notice my cat often just curls up on my table right before the computer screen, and is totally unaffected by the movie.

Or, remember the time when we thought there was a dot or mark in between the letters of something we have written on our wide computer screen. We tried to apply all kinds of commands on the keyboard to clear the mark away. Later, we discovered that it was really a piece of dirt stuck on the screen! We have projected the mark onto our document in a digital way, as it were!

Our real life, too, is one story after another, even overlapping. We love watching reruns of these stories, and emotionally react accordingly. Notice, over the years, we begin to see how these stories were actually different from what we had thought of them at first. So, we do not react to them so much any more. We often change our stories, or even memories of them. We keep projecting our present ideas onto our life stories.

So, the issue was *never* with the story or the screen. There was nothing moving on the screen at all: our minds created all the movements and emotions. How did we go through life getting frustrated with these stories – of what someone had done or not done, of what we should be or what we were, of the weather, or even the traffic? The point is that we actually have all the control we want over these stories.

A story is harmless until we believe it. It's not the story, but the *attachment* to the story, that causes suffering. When we *believe* the story, we suffer, because we have made it true – when it is really not. This is called delusion. It is *not* really true. When we understand this and accept this, it is a very good start.

Why is it true? We create our own story, a great fiction. Our mind has projected this story to us. We can and must only work with what is really true, how we really feel. Here, there are only three kinds of truths that we can and need to work with. These

¹ See **Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta** (S 56.11), [SD 1.1](#).

truths concern “me,” “yours” and “all.” A lot of stress comes from not knowing how to deal with these truths.

The truth about “me” is that we tend to think we are the only one facing the problem. We tend to think in terms of “I,” “me,” and “mine.” Try to avoid using these three misleading pronouns when working with a problem. “I” am not the problem, “me” is not the problem, “mine” is not the problem. There is only the “problem” – deal with “it.”

For example, instead of thinking, “I am angry...sad...confused,” trying saying, “This is anger...sadness...confusion. This feeling is not helpful. Letting it go, letting it go.”

The same approach applies when we blame others. Instead of thinking, “I hate so-and-so,” trying saying, “So-and-so has done this thing...which is painful, and so on.” Notice no personal pronouns.

Personal pronouns tend to overwhelm us with unwanted emotions. So look at a negative thought or stressful feeling as a compassionate alarm clock that says, “You’re caught in a story.” The clock is waking us up to true reality. We can then work more effectively with true reality. That’s all!

What do I do about it? The universal fact of life is that we all must face some things we do not like at all. Yet, we all react differently to a problem, even the “same” problem (if there is one). Some respond better to problems than others. In other words, we can learn to respond to problems in a wholesome way.

We may not be able to change what is happening before us. We can, however, moderate ourself towards the problem. Or better, we can learn from the problem. Indeed, problems teach us better about ourself than success ever can.

What would I be then? So, to recap: when we are faced with a problem, the first thing we should do is to ask: “**Is it really true?**” This helps us define the problem more objectively. Then, we ask: “**Why is it true?**” We go on to examine what the problem is really about. Then, we ask, “**What do I do about it?**” We reflect how the problem can actually help us to know ourself better.

Now we are ready to ask: “**What would I be then?**” How would I feel if I do not believe all these stories?

Well, now that I do not have any of those stories of what someone had done or not done, of what we should be or what we were, of the weather, or even the traffic, I would feel less stressed and much lighter. Why don’t I just let go of the story. After all, it’s just that: a story, a thought.

Why don’t I just turn it all around. So what if someone had done such and such a thing? So what if I have not got what I want? So what if the weather is bad? So what if this traffic is not moving? It’s not that bad. Aren’t these statements just as true?

Then, go back and work on the 4 questions again: “Is it really true?” “Why is it true?” “What do I do about it?” “What would I be then?”

If we feel like praying, it should be this: “[My name], I’ll be happy, totally independent of how others think of me!” *Even if I’m now in a mess, my mind will not be in a*

mess. When the mind is happily calm, it simply clears up. What we want is right here. That is why the Buddha sits radiantly alone under the Bodhi tree.

R394 Simple Joys 275

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