

The Four Noble Truths: Overview in Terms of Anxiety

The Fourth Truth: An Eightfold Path Leads to the End of Anxiety 6.16.21

Introduction

This year we'll be exploring the heart of the Buddha's teaching: the Four Noble Truths.

This is his very practical wisdom about **why we become stressed and unhappy, and especially: what we can do about it.**

These are more exactly translated as *the truths of the noble ones*: we are drawn to them by what is good and admirable within us, which is then developed further as we engage these truths sincerely in our practice. In effect, these are *Four Ennobling Truths*.

To summarize:

There is suffering.

Our suffering has a deep source, which is craving.

We can cease craving, and thus cease our suffering.

There is an effective path to the ending of our craving and suffering.

The Buddha said we should understand suffering, abandon craving, realize (experientially) their cessation, and develop the path that leads to (and embodies) this end.

In the months ahead, we will get into the details of these four truths, and their very useful applications to our daily life.

Currently, in four talks, as an introduction to these Ennobling Truths, I'm exploring them in terms of **anxiety**.

So far we have explored:

1. The first truth that sometimes we feel anxious
2. The second truth that craving creates anxiety
3. The third truth that anxiety can cease

You might like to listen to the recordings of these talks and/or look at my notes for them at this link: <https://www.rickhanson.net/multimedia/audio/talks/buddhist-wisdom/>.

Tonight, we will focus on anxiety through the lens of the Fourth Noble Truth: there is a path, with eight key elements, that leads to an ending of anxiety, with less and less anxiety – and other kinds of suffering – along the way.

And I will preview a number of important ideas and methods that are *generally applicable* to the four noble truths and skillful practice of any kind. These are typically flagged with an arrow: → .

I'm going to cover a lot of ground directly and briskly. Remember that this is an overview and that we will come back to these themes again and again, and that you can listen to this talk and also read the notes for it. Please don't be anxious that you might be missing some of these teachings about anxiety!

Overview of the Eightfold Path

This is the Buddha as a doctor, teacher, and coach telling us what to DO to ease our suffering, reduce our harms, and find that highest happiness, which is peace.

Developmental Change

When I discussed the Third Noble Truth, I described awakening as like a two-wheeled cart – drawing on a metaphor that emerged as Buddhist evolved and moved into Tibet and China – that follows two tracks:

- Developmental change that releases those things in ourselves that create suffering and harm, and that cultivates those things that foster the happiness and welfare of ourselves and others
- Recognition of the original nature of ourselves and all things: always already wakeful, good, loving, peaceful, and content

These two “wheels” support each other; both are good.

→ Practicing with the Eightfold Path is mainly a process of developmental change. As you do this, it is therefore important to bring in the balance of

recognizing your original nature: already all right, already enough, nothing to fix or improve, already one with timeless mystery.

Synergistic, Not Sequential

All of its elements work together, and can be kept in mind in daily life. It is not an eight step sequence, starting with the first one and culminating with the eighth. It is more like a piece of music in which all the instruments are playing, though one or the other – the flute here, the drums there – may come into the foreground from time to time.

Proper and Skillful

Each of the eight elements is prefaced, in Pali, with the word *samma*. This word means “right, proper, as it ought to be, best.” It is usually summarized as Right – not in the sense of a correct answer, or something to be righteous and snooty about, but in the sense of what is most fitting, most effective, most skillful.

If “Right” feels too pushy or all-knowing to you, you could try “Wise” and see how that feels.

The Eight Parts of the Path

Here are the eight parts, aspects, elements of the path – I think best understood as activities, *practices*: verbs, not nouns:

Right View

Right Intention

Right Speech

Right Conduct

Right Livelihood

Right Effort

Right Mindfulness

Right Concentration

In the months ahead, we will explore each of these, so I won’t get into the details here.

→ Still, you might feel that one or two of these eight are particularly appropriate to focus on these days.

Sila, Samadhi, Panna

But I will say here that these eight practices can be clustered in terms of the “three pillars” of Buddhist practice – clusters that we can find in other traditions as well:

Sila – Virtue, restraint, morality

Right Speech

Right Conduct

Right Livelihood

Samadhi – Concentration, meditation, healing the mind, deep absorption

Right Effort

Right Mindfulness

Right Concentration

Panna – Wisdom, insight, recognition of impermanence and interbeing

Right View

Right Intention

While the path is a whole, and all of its elements are involved from the start, still there can be a loose progression that moves:

- from establishing a basic decency and non-harming in one’s behavior including toward oneself (i.e., *sila*) . . .
- to training and purifying the mind, and having illuminating non-ordinary experiences (i.e., *samadhi*) . . .
- and to liberating insights into the deep causes of suffering, and into the empty nature of all phenomena (i.e., *panna*).

→ Ask yourself if one of these three clusters would be most appropriate to focus on these days.

In the Garden of the Mind

Now I'd like to approach the Eightfold Path in a kind of cross-sectional way in which the three fundamental ways to engage your mind productively could be applied to each of its elements.

Giving us – yikes – a 3 x 8 matrix of ways to practice. Ruh roh! I won't walk through the 24 potential cells of that matrix here – though you might like to play with this on your own: ideally applied to something specific and concrete that matters to you, to bring it down out of the clouds.

Let's apply these three fundamental ways to engage your mind to releasing anxiety.

It will help if you have a specific focus, on a particular kind of anxiety you are dealing with these days.

I'll use the metaphor of your mind as a garden. Let's say there is some anxiety there. It's not bad, it's not wrong – but if it is no longer serving a useful function, it is an unpleasant experience while also crowding out some beneficial and enjoyable things in your mind. In a word, it's a kind of weed.

What can you do?

Let Be

First, you can simply witness the garden and the anxiety within it.

You can apply this right now to something you are anxious about:

Stepping back . . .

not identifying with the weed: you may *have* it but that does not mean than you are it . . .

staying calm and centered while you observe the anxiety . . .

accepting it, not fighting it, not criticizing yourself for having it . . .

having compassion for yourself . . .

exploring and investigating its different aspects . . .

sensing down into what is deeper, more vulnerable, younger . . .

seeing the flow of consciousness, seeing some of what causes anxiety, and seeing in turn some of what anxiety causes

You are *letting the anxiety be*, as you explore it in a receptive spaciousness.

In so doing, the anxiety may shift and change. It may release. But you are not deliberately nudging it one way or another.

Even if the anxiety doesn't change, you are changing your *relationship* to it through letting be. Even if the weed remains, somehow it doesn't bother you so much.

→ The metaphor of the salt in the big bucket of clean water: not so harsh.

You are *being with* your mind.

→ This is the primary practice: it's often all we need to do, and often it's all we *can* do. And as practice proceeds and bears fruit, increasingly we simply rest in being, serenely being with whatever arises as it passes away.

→ But it is not the only way we need to engage the mind. Longstanding negative patterns, hardwired physically in the brain and the rest of the body, don't just change because we are aware of them. And important skills and qualities don't just develop on their own while we witness the streaming of consciousness.

We must *work with* the mind as well. Which has two aspects (interestingly, these are clearly summarized in the Right Effort element of the Eightfold Path).

Let Go

You can also apply this right now to something you are anxious about:

Releasing sensations, tensions, somatic markers, etc. in the experience of anxiety . . .

Letting go of thoughts, perspectives, meanings related to anxiety; recognizing exaggerated, catastrophizing, or simply wrong beliefs . . .

Directly releasing feelings of apprehension, uneasiness, fear; releasing any related feelings of sadness, hurt, anger . . .

Letting go of desires related to anxiety, such as for perfect certainty or safety, or for unrealistic protection by others . . .

Letting go of behaviors related to anxiety, such as withdrawing, freezing, huddling, obsessing, acting compulsively, or using problematic activities such as drinking too much to numb out the anxiety . . .

We are releasing, easing, letting go, making space.

We are pulling the weed – or at least pruning it.

Let In

And in the space that was cleared, we can plant some flowers.

First you could cultivate several psychological strengths that are well-known to be helpful with anxiety.

As I name these strengths now, you could take a moment to recognize how they might help you with something you're anxious about:

Calming, relaxing the body . . .

Recognizing that you are basically alright right now . . .

Having a sense of others caring about you, and you caring about them . . .

Appraising threats realistically, not overestimating them . . .

Appraising your inner and outer resources realistically, not underestimating them . . .

Feeling a sense of your own strength, determination, grit, moxie . . .

→ Note that, as I've said, you can have psychological resources as experiences in the moment, as *states*, and you can develop these resources as *traits* that are increasingly with you wherever you go.

From experiencing to learning.

Through deliberate internalization – taking in the good – states can become traits that foster more states which reinforce those traits . . . in an upward spiral.

→ In this way, you will become increasingly able to meet your needs and those of others without tipping into craving about it, without tipping into a mind colored by fear, frustration, and heartache. This is a powerful psychological engine for moving from the Second to the Third Noble Truth, from craving more to craving less . . . and eventually not at all.

Second, in terms of cultivation, growing flowers in the garden of your mind, you could repeatedly internalize the felt sense of needs met in the moment.

Anxiety is a natural response to the sense of key needs being unmet: such as our fundamental needs for safety . . . satisfaction . . . and connection.

Therefore, you could look for and value and even promote the sense of being *safe enough* in the moment . . . satisfied enough . . . and connected enough.

And when you have these experiences, take them in to develop the traits of an increasingly unconditional underlying sense of peacefulness, contentment, and love.

→ In this way, when the challenges of life come, you will be increasingly rested in the Green Zone of resilient well-being – and it will be harder and harder to tip you into the Red Zone of craving.

Concluding Perspectives

The Three Modes of Practice Work Together

The three major ways to engage the mind all support each other.

Also, sometimes there is a natural sequence, such as if you are bothered about something, that moves from letting be to letting go to letting in . . . which might enable you to be with your mind at an even deeper level.

Maintain Mindfulness, Insight, and Love

Mindfulness is to be present in all three major ways to engage the mind: whether you are letting be, letting go, or letting in. Active deliberate efforts inside your mind – such as letting go and letting in – are not at odds with mindfulness.

Insight, also, is to be present in all three modes of practice: insight into your own psychology, insight into the interactions between yourself and others, and insight into the nature of all experiences as impermanent, compounded, interdependent, and therefore empty of substance, identity, and inherent existence.

And your heart is to be involved as well in all three, with feelings of compassion and self-compassing, friendliness, feeling connected, and love.

Appreciate Well-Being . . . and Beyond

The well-being that develops in the Eightfold Path, and which develops as we be with and work with the garden of the mind, is increasingly *like* our original nature.

Personal well-being is worth cultivating in its own right, and also because it helps us be more aware of our original nature, and perhaps become more accessible, more permeable to that Ground.

But personal well-being is not the ultimate liberation of mind and heart. As my teacher Joseph Goldstein once told me: “Keep going.”