

The Four Truths of Time and Existence

Liam Salsman, April 5, 2026

The Buddha is often called the Great Physician (1); his Four Truths can be seen to mirror the diagnostic method of classical Indian medicine (2). In this paper I map the medical framework onto the Buddha's Four Truths: disease, etiology, prognosis, and treatment. This frames the paradox of time (in the relative sense) as a penetrable situation aimed at recovery—or awakening, if you prefer. The suffering that arises from overreliance on a conventional view of time, and Dogen's reconceptualization of that view, can both be unpacked within the Four Truths as follows:

1. The First Truth: The Diagnosis (Dukkha; The Truth of Suffering)

[Suffering arises when a gap is created between time and existence.](#)

In the gap between time and existence, suffering can take many forms. There can be great suffering in my desire (or lack thereof) to get from point A to point B, sooner or later. The idea that time is linear was drilled into me from a young age, and today that notion can seem persistent. I will share an anecdote:

In grade school they taught us how to use a ruler and how to tell time on analog clocks so we'd know when it was recess, lunch, or time to leave. Being late was frowned upon, so I tried always to be on time. In middle school I'd wait for the bell to go home; I couldn't just sit and focus—I was fidgety, bored, and daydreamed. I amused myself one day by playing with the hair of the girl in front of me until the teacher noticed and called me to the front. Since I sat in the back, that long walk was humiliating. In the '60s it was acceptable for teachers to paddle us or whack our fingertips with a ruler. The teacher I had wasn't afraid to make use of that practice. She took my hand and squeezed it so the finger tips came together, then she whacked my fingertips hard about five or six times. What I learned from that experience was just how much more anxious I was for the bell to ring so I could go home. My teacher cared a lot about us kids, I'm sure, but

she had a lesson plan to deliver, and she only had so much *time* to accomplish that objective.

Now, you might have noticed as I read that anecdote that much of it had to do with clocks, the school bell, the ruler and how it was used, anxiety, boredom, daydreaming, the class period, and getting into trouble. What did you notice about the way in which me and my teacher dealt with time, and the effect it seems to have had on each of us? I know that at least as far as I am concerned, that clock on the wall was not me and I was not time, but I never once questioned that assumption.

In Dogen's fascicle on Existence-Time (3), he writes:

"We can never measure how long and distant or how short and pressing twelve hours is; at the same time, we call it "twelve hours." The leaving and coming of the directions and traces [of Time] are clear, and so people do not doubt it. They do not doubt it, but that does not mean they know it. The doubts which living beings, by our nature, have about every thing and every fact that we do not know, are not consistent; therefore our past history of doubt does not always exactly match our doubt now. We can say for the present, however, that doubt is nothing other than Time." (Nishijima & Cross, 1994, p. 92)

As I read this, there is subjective and conventional time. A day can feel as though it flies, or it drags at a snail's pace, and all our measurements can tell us is that there are 24 hours in a day, that each moment comes and goes, and that time flows linearly. Most of us don't doubt this. Time seems to be a kind of entity separate from ourselves, and it seems so obvious. But if we did doubt it (or question it) we might come to see that at least in a broader sense, time is actually not what we think it is. Even if we say we doubt it, do we know what we're doubting? Is our doubt today the same as it was in the past? Have we considered that doubt and time are inseparable? Have we looked into it well enough to have some kind of awakening about it? If we're aware of how we suffer at the

foot of Father Time, and we want to recover from this illness, we can take the next step, which is to consider the cause.

2. The Second Truth: The Etiology (or Samudaya, The Cause of Suffering)

[Ignorance of time and existence leads to attachment and desire.](#)

Noticing how we suffer when we occupy the gap between time and existence is a valuable practice. It's like diagnosing a health condition that we caused ourselves: weight gain or loss, sluggishness, low blood sugar, sinusitis, depression, or other conditions. Often our diet plays a role, and frequently there's a cause we can correct. There's also the "mental diet" — the thoughts, beliefs, assumptions, and habits we've nurtured (knowingly or not) over the years — that prevents us from seeing the truth about ourselves, and, in this case, about time.

In Dogen's fascicle on Uji (4) he writes:

"Do not think flowing is like wind and rain moving from east to west. The entire world is not unchangeable, is not immovable. It flows. Flowing is like spring. Spring with all its numerous aspects is called flowing. When spring flows there is nothing outside of spring. Study this in detail. Spring invariably flows through spring. Although flowing itself is not spring, flowing occurs throughout spring. Thus, flowing is completed at just this moment of spring. Examine this thoroughly, coming and going. In your study of flowing, if you imagine the objective to be outside yourself and that you flow and move through hundreds and thousands of worlds, for hundreds, thousands, and myriads of eons, you have not devotedly studied the buddha way." (Tanahashi, 1985, p.80)

What this tells me is that things do not flow through one moment to the next like wind and rain across a prairie, but that flowing takes place, dynamically, inside the one moment we and the entire universe have become where we are, which is our dharma position. The moment of Spring is its dharma-position. Even though flowing and spring

are distinct aspects of the same reality, they are inseparable. In this way, spring flows dynamically through itself. Also, just as time is not flowing past us, the self does not flow through time, in either case, as though trying to thread a needle, or myriads of needles.

From Dogen's Genjokoan, we find another example, which I am paraphrasing. Firewood is its own universe and so is ash. Even though one thing becoming another continually occurs, each moment that arises, or each dharma position, is not the future of the previous one, nor a consequence of the past. It is a new, spontaneous beginning out of one facet or another of all that exists, including the past and the future.

In this etiology, the cause of our suffering with respect to time is that of a wrong view. Our mistaken view of time is what drives our desires and attachment. It's not that desire is something to be avoided. A certain degree of desire is necessary to get along in life. If we did not think that time flows like wind and rain, or that firewood turns into ash, our desires and attachments might be far less of an issue.

3. The Third Truth: The Prognosis (or Nirodha, The End of Suffering)

[Healing \(or wholeness\) comes from realizing that time and existence are inseparable.](#)

Existence means *everything* — every mode of time, every being, and every form, including those not yet alive or not yet existing. Time's inseparability from existence is total; nothing is left out. By realizing the nature of time and existence, we can transform our suffering. These are not just words. It *can* happen. The prognosis is auspicious.

In Dogen's fascicle on Uji (5), he writes:

“Each moment is all being, each moment is the entire world. Reflect now whether any being or any world is left out of the present moment.” (Tanahashi, 1985, p.77)

How can we start to realize the oneness of time and existence? Instead of focusing on time, let's consider the air we all breathe. One person's exhale is another person's inhale. Plants take our exhaled carbon dioxide and split it to release the oxygen so that someone else can breathe it in and do likewise. The air we humans breathe is the same air that the animals, and insects breathe. The air that we all breathe out in the form of carbon dioxide, is the air that the mountains, the grasslands and all the bodies of water breathe. The air we breathe today is dependent upon the air we once breathed 500,000 years ago, or even since the inception of the existence of all the nitrogen, oxygen and carbon dioxide on this planet (6). Even if we live in a closed-loop system, the loop itself is dependent for its existence upon the existence of something else further out into the universe. As you look into this, you may start to see that everything, not just the air we breathe, but time included, is the Total Functioning [or Zenki (7), in Dogen's usage]—existing as one dynamically alive and penetrating, here and now.

There is not one thing in this universe that can exist without the existence of all the other aspects of our world. Time is one of those aspects. It will never be a separate entity, except in our minds. Just as we are the entire universe, we are time, and not one thing is left out.

4. The Fourth Truth: The Treatment (or Magga, The Path to Liberation)

[The treatment \(or path of liberation\) is the medicine of total exertion.](#)

Neither abiding, exertion nor penetration are what they might appear to be at first glance. While effort is required, this is not a struggle. It is more the idea of effortless effort. What makes it effortless? What makes being right where we are in whatever the dynamic happens to be, a place of complete acceptance and mindful abiding, and therefore a place of transformative healing and liberation? Perhaps it is timelessness...which is not a forever thing, but the here and now, existing as the quality of this one moment, exhaustively penetrating this dharma talk. The only effort required to begin to make this mutual is our attention.

In Dogen's fascicle on Uji (6), he writes:

"The time-being is entirely actualized without being caught up in nets or cages. Deva kings and heavenly beings appearing right and left are the time-being of your complete effort right now. The time-being of all beings throughout the world in water and on land is just the actualization of your complete effort right now. All beings of all kinds in the visible and invisible realms are the time-being actualized by your complete effort, flowing due to your complete effort. Closely examine this flowing; without your complete effort right now, nothing would be actualized, nothing would flow." (Tanahashi, 1985, p.80)

The way of not being caught or imprisoned by nets and cages is our aspiration. The treatment requires action. This action is our medicine. However, it is not the action of going after something but of allowing and letting go. The nets or cages must be identified on a daily basis as we sit and meditate, or as we go about our business. When we're aware of being caught or imprisoned, that awareness is total exertion releasing the trap.

Chores to do? No worries — we do them unreservedly and the universe reciprocates. If we see it as our dharma position (a wholehearted, awake and inseparable stance toward the present moment), the effort required is not a struggle in the conventional sense. As we totally exert (or penetrate) this position, with past and future cut off, the illusion of a gap between ourselves and time is dispelled. We are not merely in that dharma position; we are that position, along with the entire universe.

When we are totally exerting ourselves, we are not killing ourselves trying to get free from something or to make everything right and in accord with our own designs. We are not manipulating the world around us to get what we want, and wondering why we suffer so much and why we struggle so hard. We don't worry about getting old, or about how old others are or will be, or how young. We are liberating and breathing as a new

being and universe with every step we take. Everything we are, and that we see and do from a place of acceptance, letting go, and embracing is the effort that actualizes all the other aspects of this universe where we are in this one moment. When there is total exertion, there are no nets and cages, there is *just this*.

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The Four Truths of Time and Existence: The following truth statements are suggestive only. I turn to this when I am stuck in conventional time and it liberates me.

First Truth of Existence-Time: Suffering arises when a gap is created between time and existence.

Second Truth of Existence-Time: Ignorance of time and existence leads to attachment and desire.

Third Truth of Existence-Time: Healing (or wholeness) comes from realizing that time and existence are inseparable.

Fourth Truth of Existence-Time: The treatment (or path of liberation) is the medicine of total exertion.

Terminology

- 1) Uji, or Existence-Time, or Being-Time: Existence (or being) and time are inseparable.
- 2) Ju Hoi, or Dharma position, or dharma seat: the fully embodied totality of myriad things/beings as a moment of being-time; continuous practice. (From Lion's Roar: <https://www.lionsroar.com/notes-on-dogen-being-time/#:~:text=Uji%20begins%20with%20four%20couplets,Chang,%20Mr.>)
- 3) Gujin, or Total Exertion: complete expression of a moment. (From Lion's Roar, same link as above.)
- 4) Zenki, or Total Functioning: See source number 7 below. Also, the following passage is from Dogen's fascicle called Zenki and expresses Total Function:

Life is, for example, like sailing in a boat. Although we set a sail, steer our course, and pole the boat along, the boat carries us and we do not exist apart from the boat. By sailing in the boat, we make the boat what it is. Assiduously study [such an example of] this very moment (shōtōimmoji). At such time, there is nothing but the world of the boat. The heavens, the water, and the shore—all become the boat's time (fune no jisetsu); they are not the same as the time that is not the boat. Hence, I make life what it is; life makes me what I am. In riding the boat, one's body and mind, and the self and the world are together the dynamic function of the boat (fune no kikan). The entire earth and the whole empty sky are in company with the boat's vigorous exertion. Such is the I that is life, the life that is I.

Articles

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Each Moment Is The Universe, Dainan Katagiri

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