

The problem is not that there are problems. The problem is expecting otherwise and thinking that having problems is a problem.” – Theodore Isaac Rubin

Everyone has problems

Everyone has problems: situations or circumstances that are unwelcome and cause perplexity or distress. This universality suggests that problems must, in some way, be intrinsic to the very nature of our minds. Indeed, the mind seems to be organized in relation to problems and our effort to solve them, deal with them or otherwise overcome them.

Accepting this premise, as a psychologist, I’ve found it useful to inquire deeply about problems, how they’re constructed and the role that they play in psychological life. I’ve come to see that problems entail essential mysteries. Why does life so often constellate itself around problems? Why do the things we most dread and fear so often show up in our lives? And, of all the possible ways that life events might be construed, why are particular themes of meaning so likely to recur?

To anticipate the major point in this article, problems have a function in psychological life that’s quite like the role of pain in the body: they draw our attention to particular frictions, conflicts and areas of dysfunction in our minds. Problems coalesce where we’re stuck, and they invariably seem to point exactly where we need to look.

The underlying conclusion of this inquiry is that problems serve an important psychological function. And to extend this conclusion, my point of view is that problems express our innate intelligence; there’s a wisdom encoded within them that we can better access when we bring appropriate awareness and discernment to them.

These truths are beautifully expressed by the image of a lotus in a pond, with its roots in the mud below and its flower orienting towards the light above. No mud, no lotus.

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Why do we have problems, anyway?

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The *why* of problems begins, by definition, with the fact that there are circumstances in life that we just don't welcome. There are many situations like this, and these are just a few of the most common:

- We have bodily discomfort or limitation
- We have a painful conflict with someone
- We're thwarted in regard to something that we're trying to do
- We have expectations that aren't met
- We've made a painful mistake

Always, the bottom line is the same: we want something we don't have or can't get, we've gotten what we wanted but then lost it (or are afraid of losing it), or we're averse to something that's happening. This was the fundamental reality the Buddha pointed to in the [Four Noble Truths](#): the circumstances of life are always, intrinsically and unavoidably, unsatisfactory.

The surface layer of a problem is generally not very subtle. It announces itself with an experience of suffering. Suffering can be felt (recognized) at many different levels: via the *direct experience* (what we see, hear, touch, smell and taste), as well as the associated feelings, perceptions, images and thoughts. Problems also have a narrative or storyline(s), and each of these is worthy of our conscious attention. (Suggestions for inquiring more deeply into problems will be provided in the next section below.)

As implied above, the constellation of a problem invariably reveals something that we want to change or fix. This goal automatically becomes the focus of our attention and cognitive resources. The mind sets to work on figuring out a solution.

Indeed, the solving of problems is one of the primary design functions of the brain/mind. The evolution of symbolic capacity gave human beings the ability to think and talk about problems in order to explore alternative possibilities for their solution. At the same time, this modelling of problems in cognitive space opened a dimension of imaginary scenarios in regard to what might've been, should've been or could happen in the future, all of which can obscure the simple but compelling reality of what is. Infinite possibilities for unhappiness!

We can see problems as a leading edge or horizon of changes that we need to make within ourselves.

From another point of view, problems arise when the personality strategies that we adopted in childhood to survive our family circumstances become an obstacle to our further unfolding. A beautiful metaphor is that of the silkworm binding itself in its own

silk. The silk represents the beautiful, rich resources that we use to defend ourselves against the difficulties of life, but the personality structure that at first protects us later winds up imprisoning us. In this way, we can see problems as a leading edge or horizon of changes that we need to make within ourselves.

A problem first makes itself known to us by the upsurge of an unpleasant emotion: “reactivity.” [Pema Chodron](#) uses the Tibetan term *shenpa* to describe this phenomenon of getting hooked by something sticky in the mind. Reactivity may be triggered by an acute event, or it may be a long-standing reactive pattern. It’s generally associated with unhappy thoughts, images, fantasies or narratives in the mind.

Some problems are predicaments

The dictionary defines a predicament as a “difficult, unpleasant, or embarrassing situation.” We’re caught between a rock and a hard place, or faced with the necessity of choosing between terrible alternatives. Predicaments represent the plight of being in an intractable situation. Moreover, as we contrive to fix or alleviate the problem, we often wind up making matters worse.

This type of situation is illustrated in a Buddhist teaching story about a leper who lived in the forest and suffered from terrible pain and itching. The only way the unfortunate leper could relieve himself was to dig a hole, fill it with burning wood to create hot charcoal, and rub the afflicted part of the body with charcoal. He could only get relief by creating another kind of suffering. This is a paradigm for what our lives are often like, as the solutions we apply to our problems often become the root of the next problem. For example, we may use drugs or alcohol to dull the emotional pain of a difficult relationship, only to find ourselves caught in the snare of a difficult addiction.

Unfortunately, it seems that by their very nature, predicaments draw us into a kind of mental fog. The etymology of the word “predicament” connotes a state of being, a state of mind that obscures clear comprehension of both the problem and its potential resolution. The fog of a problem is difficult to see through, and mental clarity is impaired. Therefore, predicaments tend to entangle us in patterns that involve doing the same unconstructive things over and over, or ruminating in ways that lead us nowhere.

Figuring out or thinking about problems is a wonderful tool, but this approach isn’t suited to every kind of problem. The difficulty, as Albert Einstein is famed for saying, is that we can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.

In addition, there's an essential bind within problems that comes from the fact that our instinctive reaction to a predicament is often to resist or struggle against it. This is the quintessential aspect of predicament: unconsciously, we put ourselves in opposition to *what is*. The quality of this bind is conveyed by the Chinese finger trap. The only way to get out of such a trap is to do the counter-intuitive thing by pushing our fingers *into* the puzzle/trap, rather than continuing to try and pull them *out*. We must surrender or *let go*, and this is often an option that doesn't occur to us.

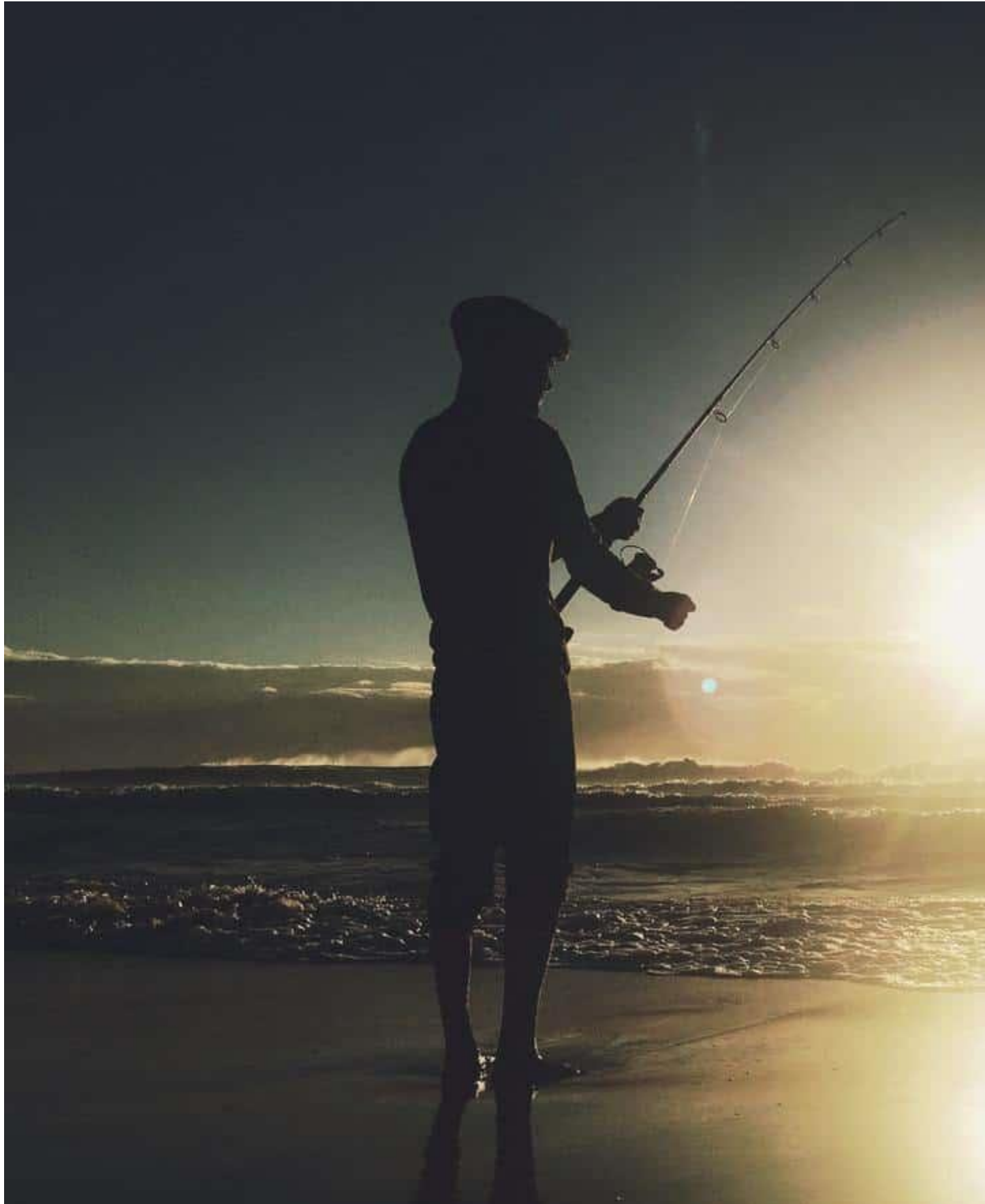
In sum, problems come into being when we encounter a cul-de-sac in our cognitive efforts to resolve a predicament with patterns of thinking that are neither generative nor productive. But apart from the question of how to cultivate the ability to let go—which will be considered in more depth below—a prior issue is the necessity to achieve clarity about the crux of a problem: where, exactly, does the problem lie?

How to use inquiry to help solve problems

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Problems can be investigated in many different ways.

- We can analyze the problem.
- We can expand upon its meaning by reflecting on it or by talking it over with someone.
- We can focus on the emotional texture or “felt sense” of the experience.
- We can examine the problem through a meditative lens, amplifying our awareness of the direct experience of it, with each moment as distinct as the proverbial snowflake.

Each of these is an important lens for exploring the nature of problems.

Here, I consider how the practice of *inquiry* can be used to explore the *what* of problems. Inquiry is a method that engages intuition in expanding or deepening our understanding of a problem. It can be most simply defined as, “living in the question of something.” I also like to think of it as marinating a question or problem in receptive awareness.

Inquiry can be described as a process akin to going fishing in the mind.

Inquiry isn't equivalent to thinking about or analyzing a problem, although clear thinking is very helpful. Rather, inquiry is a *receptive* process, a *contemplative* process in which we engage with a question of interest. Inquiry can be described as a process akin to going fishing in the mind, where the questions (or prompts) are like hooks on a fishing line that we cast out into the mind and then reel in. In this way, we put ourselves in the position of passive witness to our mental connections and associations.

Inquiry can also be likened to throwing a boomerang: we frame a question and then listen for answers that come back to us in the form of thoughts, insights or happenings. Zen *Roshi* Richard Baker [told the following story](#) that beautifully illustrates this how this process works:

I dreamt I was trying to solve a problem. A brown phone kept ringing in the background, distracting me. Finally, annoyed, I picked it up. The voice on the other end told me the answer to the problem.

In the mystery of unconscious process, it feels as though life is alive and responsive to the questions we ask, and that answers are generated (perhaps called forth by?) the intention to discover something.

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A few of the basic inquiries that can be posed in regard to any problem are as follows:

- What is the problem?
- And: what, specifically, is problematic about that?
- And/or: what is underneath that?
- What is at stake?
- What emotional needs aren't being met?
- What do I need to be right about?
- What story am I believing?
- How have I solicited or been complicit in this occurrence?

Inquiry into the *what* of the problem is deceptively simple. The idea is to keep posing the questions repeatedly, with the intention of deepening your understanding and gaining increased clarity in regard to how you're holding the problem.

In general, inquiry helps us to know and distinguish between two basic aspects of the problem or predicament: first, the circumstances in the external world (this is the objective view); and second, the felt sense of the situation, including our attitude, mood or state of mind.

While at the core of most problems is an unwanted emotional reaction, problems also have concepts or storylines associated with them, which may be thought of as narratives we use to explain to ourselves and others the nature of the predicament we're encountering.

Problems also each contain an implicit statement about what's important to us and the values we live by. Because problems are often quite complex—entangled, imprecise and unclear—the method of inquiry can be useful in clarifying exactly what's problematic about a particular experience.

As we inquire deeply into the meaning of our problems, it becomes increasingly clear that a particular problem isn't a "given," but rather, is constructed from a complex set of interrelated factors, especially emotional/psychological forces that impair our ability to see things clearly.

A certain Buddhist teaching parable illustrates the importance of clear seeing. This story tells of how monkeys could be caught if someone were to put a patch of sticky pitch [sap] on the path that they travelled. While some monkeys were clever enough to see the pitch from afar and go nowhere near it, others were foolish enough to try to seize the pitch in their hands. Once a foolish monkey discovered that its hand was now stuck in the pitch, it would try to free itself by using its other hand. With both hands stuck, the

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monkey would then try to get away using its feet, first one and then the other. Finally, in a last-ditch effort to get free, the monkey would apply its muzzle to the pitch.

There are several morals to this story. First, doing more of what doesn't work still doesn't work (what we resist, persists). Secondly, the more clearly we're able to see how a problem is constructed and held in place, the better our opportunity will be to avoid pitfalls and find our way through them.

Opportunities for us to gain wisdom

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As Margaret Mead famously said, “We are continually faced with great opportunities which are brilliantly disguised as unsolvable problems.” This is congruent with the idea that underlies inquiry practice: when we listen to problems in the right way, we often find that there’s great wisdom embedded within them. (Ultimately, of course, the great lesson is that, as A.A. Milne wrote in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, “Life is a journey to be experienced, not a problem to be solved.”)

It’s certainly true that problems usually don’t *feel like* opportunities. Problems *feel* painful. What’s so intriguing about Mead’s quote is the implication that there’s a hidden surface in problems, a way to pay attention to them that can free us from at least some of the struggle and unpleasantness.

In distinction from the effort to figure it out, inquiry engages the effort to “drop into” a problem in a way that allows it to reveal itself. This reframes both attitude and view, as instead of directing our effort towards making the problem go away, we redirect our wholehearted attention to deepening our experience of the problem. The immediate goal of this effort is to ease the pressure on ourselves and to use our own intuition as an inner compass that can help us navigate through the difficult terrain of a problem.

How do we do this? Well, simply by following the trail of our feelings and immersing ourselves in the slipstream of our awareness. This path is one that unfolds before us, moment by moment. Rather than attempting to avoid pain or accommodate some limitation or trauma, we incline the mind towards doing the opposite: opening more fully into the problem. We turn towards the experience of *this* moment. We incline the mind towards acceptance of the situation as it is.

Embracing problems has less to do with finding freedom *from* suffering than it has to do with finding freedom *within* suffering.

This kind of acceptance, [of letting go](#), shouldn’t be confused with the idea of pasting a happy face on the situation or looking for the proverbial silver lining. Embracing problems has less to do with finding freedom *from* suffering than it has to do with finding freedom *within* suffering. What we invariably find is that the core of the problem isn’t the situation or circumstances, but our inability to handle the emotion within the problem.

We may or may not be able to find our way out of a painful situation or circumstance at any given moment in time. However, by bringing contemplative attention to the problem, by being able to notice what’s happening with more discernment and more compassion, we do have the opportunity to locate the true feelings that are there, hidden beneath

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layers of protection. Then, real spaciousness can develop around the thoughts and feelings themselves.

Using inquiry to relate to problems engages the innate intelligence of the mind and heart. When we can ask the right questions and tackle them with a mind that's steady, focused and receptive, we can best discover what we need to do next. In psychological terms, while there may be no way around a problem, there may yet be a way through. As one of my patients described it, it can be like running up against a door that opens inwards: no matter how hard you push against it, it won't open, but the moment you pause in your pushing, the door opens and you can pass through.

Ultimately, the innate wisdom behind our problems is a path that leads us to know ourselves, to accept ourselves and to feel that we're real. Our problems are personal maps that can lead us beyond the trap of our psychological defenses and confusions, but before real change is possible, we first have to see, feel and understand *what is*. The first step to finding our way through a problem is to allow ourselves to fully bump up against what's not working. As the saying goes, there's no way out of the swamp except through the alligators!

Bringing awareness to the pain or our stuckness often activates a deep sorrow within, a sorrow that the spiritual psychologist John Welwood calls a "purifying sadness." Just as coal is pressed into a diamond, it's the press of problems—of illness, crisis and grief—that presses us into the clear jewel that we are. Problems make visible what's essential for us to live.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Marjorie Schuman, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist who has spent much of her professional life writing and teaching about the interconnections between Buddhism and psychotherapy. In addition to many shorter publications, she's the author of the recently published volume *Mindfulness-Informed Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis: Inquiring Deeply* (Routledge Press, 2017). Currently, Dr. Schuman is in private practice in Santa Barbara, and teaches workshops on Buddhist-informed psychotherapy and relational mindfulness. She's also a member of the faculty at Pacifica Graduate Institute and the Los Angeles Institute and Society for Psychoanalytic Studies.