

The Same but Different, but the Same

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Ajaan Fuang once quoted a teaching from Ajaan Mun, saying that people are all alike, but that we're not alike at all, but then when you come down to it, we are all alike.

Ajaan Fuang's only comment was to take that and think it over.

You can understand it in lots of ways. We all come here, we all practice, because there's some suffering in our lives: stress, pain, discontent, however you want to translate the word *dukkha*. If it weren't for that stress and suffering, we wouldn't be here. We wouldn't need to practice.

So that's what we have in common to begin with.

But the individual sufferings we have and the different tactics we have for creating suffering—we don't think of them as tactics for creating suffering but that's what they are; we find different ways of tormenting ourselves and then from there we go to torment other people too: Those vary from person to person.

Some people torment themselves with paranoia, fear of what other people may be thinking about them. Some people torment themselves with a sense of guilt, that they've been enjoying pleasures that they really shouldn't, that they have no title to.

There are all kinds of ways that we can make ourselves suffer—which is why there are so many teachings in the Canon. If it were all simple, if there were all a one-size-fits-all kind of Dhamma, the Buddha would have taught maybe just one or two techniques, a few short teachings, and that would have been it. But look at what we've got: 45 volumes.

And that's just the Canon. Not all of that comes from the Buddha, but a huge percentage does, or seems to at least. And it contains lots of different tactics for getting at our many different tactics for suffering.

But the basic outlines are all the same. This is where the similarities gets deeper. We suffer in clinging and craving. The suffering itself is clinging to the five aggregates, feeding on them. Then there's the general thirst and desire to feed on things: That's the cause of suffering. And this is true across the board.

And the path contains the same elements for everyone: virtue, concentration, and discernment.

So regardless of your nationality, regardless of the type of mental illness you suffer from—and this is what these all are, greed, anger, delusion are all different forms of mental illness—the basic structure of the problem and the basic structure of the path to its solution are the same across the board.

The difficulty lies in taking that large structure and applying it to your own particular sufferings, your own particular situation.

It's as if you have a huge medicine chest. You know you have an illness and you have a general idea of what the illness may be, but you may not really understand the specifics. So you have to try different medicines, experimenting with them until you finally get one that really works.

Fortunately, none of the medicines are poisonous. But it is easy for us to misunderstand them.

This is the other difficulty in our individual ways of suffering: We've come to the practice with lots of individual misunderstandings. I noticed that when Ajaan Fuang was teaching people, at the very beginning it was as if he had a whole toolbox full of different ways of teaching. Some people found it easy to gain concentration but had trouble using their discernment. Other people were more prone to discernment issues, more prone to analyzing things, but they had a real problem getting their minds to settle down. Some people, when their minds would settle down, would start having visions or weird sensations in the body.

So he'd have to herd them into the middle path from all directions. If someone was off to the left of the path, he'd have to say, "Go right." If other people were off to the right of the path, he'd have to say, "Go left."

But as the path progressed, I began to see more and more that the teachings would converge. This was especially true when people got to the point where they could get their minds to settle down and really be still, the point where the breath filled the body, awareness filled the body, and the breath got so calm that it you couldn't sense any coming in and out: You were fully aware of the body but you didn't sense any in or out movement in the breath. From that point on, everybody's minds fell into the same patterns, at least as far as concentration went.

But then again, there was the issue of discernment.

There's a passage in the Canon where a monk goes around and asks other monks, "What were you contemplating when you finally broke through to the Dhamma, had your first glimpse of the Dhamma or the awakening of the Dhamma eye?"

And one monk said he was contemplating the five aggregates, another monk said he was contemplating dependent co-arising, other monks were contemplating the elements, the properties, the six-sense media.

The monk asking the question got very confused, so he went to see the Buddha.

And the Buddha said, "Well, it's like a Riddle tree."

Apparently there's a tree in Asia that looks very different at different times of the year, and so it's the basis for a lot of riddles. It has red flowers at a time where it has no leaves; other times, it's full of leaves but has no flowers; at other times it has seeds but no flowers or leaves; and at other times it's totally barren, just a tangle of black branches. So, depending on which season you see the tree, your description of the tree is going to be very different. If you were gather different people's impressions of the tree, they would sound like different trees.

In the same way, different people will find different topics conducive to developing discernment. But the important element is that you first get the mind to settle down; and to get the mind to settle down, you have to find a topic that you find congenial.

Some people find simply repeating a word like “*buddho*” over and over in the mind congenial. Other people find it more congenial to focus on the breath and to make the breath comfortable, easeful, filling. Other people find that they need to contemplate the parts of the body in order for the mind to settle down: visualizing where the bones are, or visualizing the different parts of the body, taking them apart one by one, and putting them in piles on the floor around you.

There’s no one size fits all when it comes to concentration. But the important principle is that for the mind to see through its sufferings, it first has to settle down.

And in the course of settling down, you find that you do gain some insights into why your mind wanders or what kinds of things the mind gets obsessed with. Those insights are important, but they’ll be your own individual insights. It’s not that you do concentration and only when your concentration gets really good do you gain insight into the mind. You’ve got to have some insight into how the mind works from the very beginning. Otherwise you can’t get the mind to settle down.

Some people find it easy, but it’s not always easy even for them. There’ll be times when it’s hard. So you have to learn how to read your own mind, both in the particulars and in the general principles.

The general principle is: Where are you clinging? What are you feeding on? What’s the enjoyment you get out of that feeding, and what’s the stress that comes from having to feed in that way?

That’s the basic principle, those are the basic questions you ask, and you’ll find that you come up with different answers from what someone else might come up with, because you have your own particular clings, your own particular cravings. This is all very much an individual matter.

That’s one of the reasons why Ajaan Fuang, as a basic principle, told his students not to discuss their practice with one another, because what might be an important insight for one person could actually get in the way of another person’s practice if that other person tried to apply it.

But still, you’ve got to look at your own particular ways of creating suffering within the general framework. A lot of the practice is just learning to recognize old friends, quote unquote: all the little animals you’ve been feeding all the time since who knows when—issues from childhood, issues from your high school, issues from college, issues from work, issues from family. The issues that come up are very rarely strange and exotic. They’re the same old stuff you’ve been chewing over and stewing over for who knows how long. But the breath gives you a different perspective on it. The concentration gives you a different perspective on it.

The simple fact that you're now a meditator, someone practicing, puts you in a slightly different position. You're not here just to mull over the old stuff, to revive old issues, open up old wounds. You're here to understand these things: Why do you feed on these things? Why do you stir them up?

You might reply that you don't stir them up; they just come up on their own. But when they come up on their own, why do you then take them on again? A little blip comes up in the mind and all of a sudden you're back who knows where, 30 years ago, 20 years ago. Then you run with it.

The fact that it appears in your mind: That's old karma.

Your running with it and reviving the issue and getting all entangled in it again: That's your new karma.

And for a while it seems like it's just all willy-nilly, pretty pell-mell. All kinds of things come up and there seems to be no rhyme or reason. But after a while you'll begin to see common patterns: in particular, the pattern of your tendency to feed on things. It's the feeding that constitutes the suffering.

The word *upādāna*, clinging, also means sustenance and the act of taking sustenance—like the sustenance a tree gets from soil, the sustenance that a fire gets from its fuel.

We suffer in our feeding: That's something we all have in common. We may like different kinds of food and we may eat in different ways, but it's the feeding itself: That's the suffering.

But to get over this, we don't simply deny ourselves food. That's the tactic that the Buddha tried for a while. He'd been indulging in sensual pleasures as a prince for many, many years, and he saw all the horrible things that it did to his mind, indulging in those ways, and he was frank enough to recognize it as a problem.

He didn't tell himself, "Hey, the body needs to have sex, the body needs to do all these things." The body doesn't have any will of its own at all. The *mind* is what's obsessed with these things.

The body would be perfectly content to die. When it's hungry and has pangs, the body itself isn't bothered by its hunger pangs. When it's sick, the body's not bothered by the illness, it just goes ahead and does its stuff.

The mind is what gets upset by these things. The mind is what's feeding.

So he realized, "There's something wrong here with sensual desire, so now I've got to do something about it."

His first way of dealing with it was to totally deny himself of pleasure. He starved himself until he was skin and bones, but then he had the good sense to realize that that wasn't the way out either.

You can't starve the mind of its suffering simply by avoiding sensuality. It just begins to suffer in different ways. It starts feeding in different ways. The person who engages in the self-denial of that sort usually has a lot of pride. So you start feeding on the pride. You feed on the fact that you can torture yourself more than other people, and there's a pride that's involved in that. But that's not healthy food.

You've got to feed the mind on good concentration, a sense of well-being that comes simply from allowing the mind to be still, with your awareness filling the whole body, with a sense of ease where the breath feels good coming in, going out, and gets more and more refined, more and more refined as the mind grows more and more still.

You teach the mind to feed on this pleasure—the rapture, the pleasure, the ease, and ultimately just the equanimity that come as the mind settles down, gets more expansive. You feed on that so that you can then look at your other old ways of feeding, and you develop a sense of dispassion for them.

Dispassion doesn't mean that you hate them. It means simply that, as you look at them and you tell yourself, "I don't need to feed on that any more." You've outgrown it. It was miserable food, and the act of feeding itself was a miserable act of feeding. After all, most of the ways we feed are things we're really ashamed of, and they involve some harm, either to ourselves or other people.

But *this* feeding—the feeding on concentration—doesn't harm anyone at all.

So you're training the mind in how to feed in such a way that it creates less and less stress, less and less suffering, but it still has a sense of fullness. It's not like you're starving yourself. This is a blameless pleasure, and you should learn to enjoy it.

As the Buddha says, you should get the mind to settle down and indulge in it. You should really enjoy it. Without that enjoyment, you can't let go of your other attachments.

So that's one of the deeper ways in which the practice for everyone is all alike.

The individual insights start out as very personal things, but then as you get deeper and deeper, you're more in touch with the basic structure of how the mind creates suffering, regardless of what the particulars are.

And regardless of what your favorite form of concentration is, the basic structure is the same.

You've got to feed the mind in a new way so that it can give up its old feeding habits, and then gradually you get the mind to a point where it doesn't need to feed anymore—not because you've starved it, but because you've fed it really well. So well that you've found an aspect of the mind that doesn't need to feed.

Something has been touched at the mind that doesn't need to feed. Or as the Buddha says, you also touch it with your body, in the sense that it's a full experience. It's not just something in your head. It's a total experience.

So that's the point where we're all headed. The individual twists and turns along the way will be your own personal individual twists and turns. But the important point is that you learn how to see the causes of suffering in terms of their more general structure. The way you're feeding is stressful, but you can replace that with better ways of feeding, until you find something that doesn't need to feed.

That's where, on a very deep level, we're all alike.