

## *A Larger Perspective*

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Ajaan Fuang once noted that Ajaan Mun had said that we're all the same, but we're not all the same—but then when you come right down to it, we're all the same.

You can interpret that statement in lots of ways. What it comes down to is that we have a lot of similarities in terms of the big issues. But in terms of how the particulars of those big issues get worked out, we have our individual issues, which is why the Buddha had to have so many different ways of teaching the path.

There's the noble eightfold path. There are the seven factors of awakening. There are the four bases for success, the four establishings of mindfulness, the five powers, the five faculties. Each of them takes the factors of the path and arranges them and approaches them in a particular way. So it's good to make note of the fact there are these variations. But it's also good to remember that there's a larger pattern. That's why the four noble truths are the four noble truths.

What's noble about them is that they're true across the board. The word *ariya* means not only “noble,” but also “standard,” “universal.” The way suffering happens, why it happens, what can be done to put an end to it: The basic outlines are the same for everybody. And it's good to take in that larger perspective every now and then. We're here focused on the present moment, but all too often what else is there in the present moment? There are issues, our narratives from when we were younger, when we were dealing with people today, or earlier this morning, or our plans for tomorrow: all of our stuff, our narratives.

Depending on how skillful those narratives are, they can really get us tangled up. Or they can be useful. So we want to make them more skillful. One way of making them more skillful is to learn how to see them as pretty small so that they don't loom so large. This is why we spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings, compassion, empathetic joy toward all beings, equanimity toward all beings, to open up the mind a little bit—to get that concept of “all beings” in there.

This is also why the reflection on birth, aging, illness, death, separation, and the principle of karma comes in two forms. In the first, you reflect on the fact that these things apply to you. In the second, you go further: You realize, “It's not just me. It's everybody. We're all subject to aging, illness, death, separation. We're all related through our karma and are heirs to our karma.” In other words, no matter where you go, it's the same for everybody.

Think about it for a bit—how complicated that all is and how many different strands of karma there must be. You read a little bit further and the Buddha talks about how you could go through the world and it would be really hard to find someone who had never been your mother or your father or your brother or your sister or your son or your daughter. There's one tradition where they use that as a basis for having compassion for all beings. But when you think about what relationships are like between parents and children, brothers and sisters, it's not all happy. And as the Buddha said, the proper response to that thought is to want to get out, to find release.

The purpose of all these larger contemplations is to take the narratives of your life and see them in a bigger perspective. When the Buddha talks about the different kinds of speech that we're all subject to—there's kind speech and unkind speech; there's speech that's well-meaning, speech that's not that well-meaning; there's speech we like and speech that we don't like: That's to give you a larger perspective. This is the way human speech is.

When you get upset about people speaking in unpleasant ways to you, how appropriate is that? After all, you're not the only one who's being subjected to unpleasant speech. It's out there everywhere. Getting worked up about it: What does that do? It sets fire to your own mind, and you can burn away all kinds of goodness within you. You find yourself being pulled away out of this practice of being with the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, mind or mental qualities in and of themselves. You get pulled out of this frame of reference and back into your daily narratives.

Sometimes it's good not to come straight back, because sometimes when you come straight back, you're dragging in the issues from the narratives. Take a little detour. Think about the world as a whole, the universe as a whole, and think about some of those larger patterns: the patterns of karma, the patterns of death and rebirth; huge cycles of time. Then you can come back to the present moment with a better perspective—the perspective that makes it easier, as the Buddha said, to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Otherwise, your concerns about your personal world, the world of your narratives, are going to come creeping back in again.

So make use of this larger perspective. This is why the Buddha says that mindfulness practice can focus both internally and externally. And remember here that “mindfulness” means keeping something in mind. Being mindful of somebody else's breath, say, is not a matter of sitting next to them and listening to their breath. It's keeping in mind the fact that we all have breath.

The same with mindfulness of someone else's pain: You can't feel that person's pain, but you *can* reflect on the fact that everybody has their own pains. In fact, this is one of the things that really shows that we are not all one. I can't directly feel your pains. You can't directly feel mine. The same goes with all the aggregates. As you feel them from the inside, it's your particular sensation, with your particular perceptions. We each have our little own inner worlds like this that we have to sort out. And if we don't sort them out, what happens? We just keep coming back again and rubbing up against one another again and bumping each other again. How much longer do you want to do this?

When you think in these ways, it helps you get back to the present moment with the right perspective: that you want to be here with the body in and of itself. As for all those other entanglements and the vines and the elastic bands that pull you and attach you to other things, you just want to cut right through them. Be here with the body in and of itself. We don't have much of a vocabulary for this in English, this experience of how the body feels from within. They call it "qualia," they call it "proprioception," but those are just general terms.

As for the specific types of things that we feel, this is where the Buddha's vocabulary is really good. He's got the elements or the properties for your experience of the body and the aggregates about which we chanted just now. They may sound foreign, but they're actually things you're doing all the time. You feel. You perceive—in other words, you put labels on things. You fabricate thoughts. You're conscious. You're aware of having a body from the inside. It's useful to have this vocabulary to help you sense what's going on, to give you a handle on depersonalizing it, to see it in line with those larger patterns.

When the Buddha created a catechism, a series of questions for teaching basic Dhamma concepts—"What is one? What is two" all the way up to What is ten?—his most interesting question and answer was, "What is one?" The answer: "All beings subsist on food." We're out here feeding. This is what it means to be a being. You have to feed in order to maintain your identity as a being. And although we may dress up our food, feeding is not a pretty process: the fact that we have to exist on the lives of others—in some cases, actually, dead animals. Even if you're a vegetarian, you have to exist on the hard work of farmers and all the people in the supply chain. It's a pretty miserable process.

This is another one of those contemplations meant to make you want to gain release. It brings you back into the present moment with a sense of the larger picture in which it makes more and more sense to stay right here and try to sort things out.

Look at the way your mind feeds on these aggregates. You feed on your feelings. You feed on your perceptions. You create views around them. You create a strong sense of yourself around them. You create a sense of who you are based on your habits—that you do things this way and you’re better than other people because you do them that way. All this is a kind of feeding and, as the Buddha said, it’s suffering. It’s the essence of suffering. It’s happening right here.

So there’s good reason to be right here so that you can see it in terms of right here, because the cure is also right here—right here in your awareness. There are views. There are resolves. There are your plans to speak and act and gain your livelihood. There are the efforts you’re making. There’s being mindful; being concentrated on something. These are things, again, that we do all the time, but we don’t necessarily do them in the right way.

It’s not as if the Buddha’s making up new types of unheard-of activities. He’s just that he’s showing us which of these activities that we’re doing all the time are actually right in the terms of helping to extricate ourselves from this perpetual feeding and feeding and feeding.

So if you want to see things clearly, this is your perspective, this is your frame of reference: Just be right here with the breath. That’s your anchor in the present moment. If feelings come up, relate them to the breath. Mind states come up, relate them to the breath. Mental qualities that are skillful and unskillful come up, relate them to the breath. You want everything centered here so that things don’t go spinning off and creating other worlds.

When you’ve got this perspective, this frame of reference, then you can begin to see where the real problem is. It’s not out there. It’s right here. We may feel that we suffer from what other people do, but what they do is just on the outer level. It’s what you do with that inside as you bring it in: That’s where the suffering comes from. So try to develop the qualities inside that would help you see clearly why you’re holding on to the things that are actually making you suffer.

Sometimes our strongest, most resistant identity is precisely around things that make us suffer the most. Years back, when first came to America, I was on a plane with Ajaan Suwat. We were coming back from an abbot’s meeting. There were three of us—Ajaan Suwat, myself, and then a man to my right—in our row of seats. He turned to us at one point—we hadn’t said anything at all—and he said, “I don’t suffer in my life.” Seeing Buddhist monks, he probably thought, “Buddhist monks believe that life is suffering” and he wanted to make a statement that he wasn’t suffering.

Then he went on and on and on about his life, and it actually was pretty miserable. And it wasn’t one of the cases where he said, “Okay, there are bad

things in my life, but I'm not suffering from them." He was suffering. And the more he was suffering, the more he wanted to insist that he wasn't. A lot of us are like that. His son was in prison. His daughter had had a kid with a junkie. She couldn't raise the child, so the grandparents had to raise the child, and it was a cocaine baby. On top of that, they lived in Blythe, out in the middle of the desert. You could tell he was miserable, but he kept on insisting, "No, I'm not suffering."

Until you can chip away at that kind of identity, there's a lot you're going to miss. There's a lot you're not going to understand.

So this is what the practice requires of us, seeing that the things we hold to most tightly are often the things causing us the most suffering. The only way you can pull away from that is to get a larger picture. Then you begin to see that these things are not really worth holding on to. Maybe you'd be better off letting them go.

So remember the fact that on the night of the Buddha's awakening, the second knowledge of the night was what gave him a larger perspective on what was going on in this process of death and rebirth, coming back again and again and again. Seeing the larger perspective allowed him to see the pattern, and then he could take that pattern and apply it inside. He could see what was going on inside in terms of those larger patterns, and with a new vocabulary that didn't have to do with "beings" or "me" or "mine." It was just: "These events in the mind. These are events in the body. What do you do with them on that level?" It was his ability to see things in these terms that allowed him to get free.