

The Same for Everyone

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According to Ajaan Fuang, Ajaan Mun once said, “People are all alike. But they’re not all alike—but when you come right down to it, they are all alike.”

That was the teaching. Ajaan Fuang’s comment was, “You have to think about that for quite a bit to make sense of what he said.”

In other words, we have our differences, we have our peculiar ways of making ourselves suffer and making the people around us suffer, but when you come right down to it, the basic principles of why we’re suffering are all the same. We don’t understand the cause of suffering. We don’t understand what to do to put an end to suffering.

Once we can come to a genuine understanding of what suffering is, what causes it, and what we can do to put an end to it, we find that the ultimate solution is always the same for everybody.

Now, the Buddha did admit that there are various ways of conceiving the path, but there are a limited number of variations. And they all basically contain the same factors: virtue, concentration, and discernment, sorted out in different ways.

When you look at the different lists in the *Wings to Awakening*, you see that the factors are sometimes listed in different orders. For instance, in the noble eightfold path, discernment comes first, and mindfulness and concentration come at the end. In the factors for awakening, mindfulness comes first, then discernment, and then concentration comes toward the end. In the five strengths, mindfulness comes before concentration, and discernment comes at the end.

The different listings relate to the fact that we do have different propensities and each of us has different strengths and weaknesses—and sometimes our strengths and weaknesses change over time. But the basic elements are all the same.

What this means is that the path is not a matter of preference. There’s not the easy path for people who like easy paths or the hard path for people who like hard paths. It’s up to us whether we want to give ourselves over to the path completely or to take a more casual approach. But the more casual approach also means that it’s going to take a lot longer. And there are a lot of pitfalls along the way.

This is good to think about when you’re getting interested in something outside that’s going to pull you away from the path. You want to ask yourself, “How long am I going to be pulled away here?” And you don’t really know. Life is uncertain. Death and rebirth are very uncertain. They’re going to come for sure, but when, we don’t know.

So you have to remind yourself that the opportunity you have to practice now is a precious one. It’s something special and should be treated as something special.

And as to whether you like the path or don't like the path: You may have noticed that the Buddha was not the sort of teacher who was concerned about how popular his teachings were going to be. His one concern was that his teachings would get results. His main fear when the prospect of teaching came to him after his awakening was that he might put a lot of effort into it and nobody would benefit. But when he was convinced, though, that there were people who would benefit, he went ahead and taught.

And notice: In teaching, it wasn't that he needed to teach, or that he felt compelled to teach. That's something really special right there. Most teachers have a message and they just can't wait to get it to other people, as if somehow getting other people to believe in the message too confirms its truth.

The Buddha had already seen the truth of his teachings. His attainment was already complete. But he had the compassion to want to help.

At the same time, he realized that his authority as a teacher was something that only he knew. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, "If the Buddha could have taken out his attainment and showed it to people, there wouldn't be anybody who wouldn't want it. Everybody would want it." But he couldn't take it out.

At the same time, he was not in a position of authority where he could tell people what to do. He didn't claim to be a God; he didn't claim to be their Creator. As a result, he couldn't be their lawgiver. He couldn't force them to follow his words.

So he offered his teaching as an opportunity for them, as a gift.

You read in a lot of postmodern theory about how every act of speech is an attempt at gaining power over others. But that wasn't true in the Buddha's case. He'd already attained what he needed to attain, what he wanted to attain. And so he offered his teachings for anyone who was willing to take them. He offered them as a gift. If they didn't take them, as he said, he wouldn't let his mind get upset. He would maintain mindfulness as always.

But what he had found was the truth. And he was confident in the power of that truth, the efficacy of that truth. It would work.

So he offered it for people's consideration, but not with the attitude that, "This might work for you or maybe something else might work for you, I don't really know." That wasn't his attitude at all. He said, "This is what works. There's no need to doubt."

It was up to other people to accept it or not, but he was confident enough in the truth that if people would accept it and put it into practice, it would work for them. Regardless of what their background was, regardless of race or nationality: It wasn't the case that there was one truth for Indians and another truth for Chinese and another truth for Thais. The truth is the same wherever you go.

As for people who wanted a different truth, he left them to their own devices. There were times when, out of compassion, he would try to be persuasive. It wasn't that he was totally indifferent to whether people would take to his teaching or not. He saw that people really were

suffering but had the potential, whether they knew it or not, to respond to his teaching. And so he would use various techniques to persuade them.

It's interesting to note that when the Buddha was arguing with people, he rarely sought out people to argue with. For the most part, people would come to argue with him. When they would come and pick a fight, his main consideration was, "Is this person really serious about learning the truth?" If the person just wanted to score a few points, the Buddha would refuse to talk to that person. Which meant that if he *did* engage the person in an argument, it was a sign of respect: This person wants the truth.

And the techniques he would use in debating with the other person were the same techniques he would use in trying to explain something to someone who was having trouble understanding. That was his basic attitude: This person just doesn't understand.

He would draw analogies and give examples to help that person see what the Dhamma meant and how reasonable it was—and to instill in that person the desire to try the practice.

So he knew he couldn't force his teachings on people. He wasn't in a position where he could force anything on anyone. But he did know that he had something good to offer, something that, if other people accepted it, would put an end to their suffering.

And so as we sit here trying to practice his Dhamma, we should keep that thought in mind. We're here because we want to be here. We're here voluntarily.

Most of us come here with a divided will. Part of us wants to be here, and part of us wants to be someplace else. Part of us says, "I'd like faster results, I'd like this, I'd like that to be changed, I'd like this to be changed." But you can remind yourself: You've been changing things for a long time, trying to bend the world to your will. So how about trying something new?—something that might actually get results: bending your will to the Dhamma.

After all, the Buddha himself didn't invent the Dhamma. He simply pointed it out. It's something he discovered. It wasn't something he thought up because he liked the idea. But he had tried all different kinds of ways of trying to put an end to suffering and found himself going down many dead-end roads. So when he found what really worked, it wasn't just an individual discovery. It was something that—as he learned, as he taught it to other people—works for everyone who really practices it.

This is why he said that one of the factors that leads to awakening is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. Which means several things: One is basically that you try to adjust yourself to fit into the Dhamma rather than adjusting the Dhamma to fit to your preferences. And also that you practice for dispassion.

What do we have passion for? We have passion for our preferences. So try to put your preferences aside so that you can see what works.

Your ultimate preference, of course, is that you want to see the end of suffering. That particular preference the Buddha doesn't have you put aside. But as for everything else that would get in the way of that, he says, "Just let it rest for the time being. Give this a try. Give it a

serious try.” Not grim, but dedicated, consistent, using your ingenuity to overcome obstacles.

And the more you practice, the more you discover that we really are all alike, despite the differences in our strengths and weaknesses and propensities.

I noticed when Ajaan Fuang was teaching concentration: It was as if people were starting out in different spots in a field and he was trying to lead them all to one spot in the middle of the field. Some people had to be told to go north, whereas other people had to be told to go south, east, west, depending on where they were starting out. But ultimately they would all come to the same spot: the spot where the mind is still, the breath is still, your awareness fills the body.

Getting there may have required all kinds of ups and downs, not just east, west, north, and south. Some people had problems with visions; some people felt stymied because they didn't have any visions; other people had problems with the different elements in their body getting out of balance. All kinds of issues would come up as they were trying to get to this one spot.

But once they got there, the path was pretty much the same for everybody. Everything would fall right in line.

So the fact that we're starting off at different points in the field: That's where we're different. But the ultimate truth is that liberation is gained through not clinging, and not clinging is most effective when you train the mind to be still—so that as attachments grow fewer and fewer until you have just that one attachment left: the attachment to the stillness and clarity of your mind when it's in concentration. And then when everything is ready, you can cut that attachment, and you're free. Prior to that point, when you have lots of different attachments and you try to cut one, your mind immediately goes running to another. You cut that one and it goes running off to still another one.

But when you learn how to narrow down your attachments so that there are no alternatives, then once you've cut that final attachment, there's no other place for the mind to go except to freedom. That's the technique that works for everybody.

So whether you like it or not, there it is. And whether other people like it or not, there it is as well.

Once you attain that point, you don't need other people's approval to confirm it. You feel compassion for them, you'd like to share this knowledge with them, but if they don't want it, you just have to say, “Well, that's up to them, maybe somebody else is their teacher, maybe somebody else can show them the way.” And that makes life easier for everyone concerned.