

Common Ground

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When we meditate, we're stepping out of the world. As the Buddha said, you keep track of the body in and of itself, or feelings, or mind, mental qualities in and of themselves, ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The "in and of itself" there is important. Say you're going to focus on the breath. It's just the breath right here. That's the aspect of the body you're going to focus on, and everything else related to the body as it functions in the world, you just put it aside. You don't have to worry about how you look to other people, whether your body is strong enough to do the work you want, how old it's getting: simply the sense of the breath coming in, going out. Which is the same for everybody as you get focused on the breath in and of itself. And as you're stepping out of the world, you're also stepping out of yourself in the world.

The "you" in here is just your awareness and the thoughts that you use to keep with the breath. That's the only part of you that's relevant. The you that functions in the world, put that aside. This way, we all have common ground because right now what we're experiencing is the body from the inside, our awareness as it relates to the body and the breath as it gives rise to feelings of either pleasure or pain. You try to breathe in such a way so that it's more pleasant. You've got body, feelings, mind, three of the frames of reference all there.

That's it. That's your world for the moment. That's you for the moment—and it's from this perspective that we look at our minds. We get to step out of our normal thought patterns and identities and get a grounding here—and this ground is common ground. It's what we all have in common. Little details may be different, but this is where we all come to.

I noticed when I was studying with Ajaan Fuang as he was teaching people breath meditation, different people would come and have all kinds of different problems. Sometimes it seemed like he was herding cats. It's as if we're all going to one spot but some of us are coming from the north, some are coming from the south, some from the east, some from the west. But there came a point in

meditation where if you got to the level where awareness is filling the body, the breath was getting more and more calm, more and more refined, to the point where it actually stopped, then from that point on everybody's meditation was the same. They went through the same steps.

There's a common structure to the mind. Now, to get to this level may require different techniques, different strategies for different people, but we get finally to that one point where it's all the same. Ajaan Fuang once said that Ajaan Mun commented that, "We're all the same, but we're not the same. But when you come right down to it, we are the same." In other words, we all want happiness, we're all suffering. The details of the kind of happiness we think we want and the details of the way we suffer: Those are different. But when you get down to the common structure, it's all the same.

After all, what do the four noble truths teach us? They teach us that the reason we're suffering is not because of the things outside. It's because of the habits we have in the mind: the habits that made us get born to begin with, our craving and our clinging. And so to solve the problem, we all have to turn inside. And although the craving and clinging may be different for different people—because we crave different things and cling to different things—the actual processes are all the same.

The clinging goes to the five aggregates, and everybody has five aggregates. The form of the body, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness, these we have in common. And the ways we cling: We cling through sensuality, through our habits and practices, through views about the world, and through ideas of who we are. And although the views and the ideas of who we are, and our habits and practices, and the particularity of our ideas of what sensual pleasures we want may be different, the general outline is all the same. And the basic tools for carrying out our duties around the aggregates are all the same. Which means we have common ground.

I noticed that staying in Wat Dhammasathit with Ajaan Fuang's students, that even though we came from very different backgrounds, the fact that we had something in common in our practice meant the different backgrounds were nothing threatening, nothing alienating. In fact, they were interesting because we

did have this common ground in the practice from which we could talk. It was like learning different ways of being a human being. When you think about the teaching on rebirth, you realize that when you see somebody, you've been there before. Whatever they are now, you've been there at some point. So nobody's alien. Nobody's a stranger. It's only that this time around we're dealt a different hand of cards, and it's interesting to see what cards the other people have, what perspective they're coming from, different insights on what it's like to be a human being.

And at Wat Dhammasathit we could share our stories about how we encountered problems with the meditation. I, as a Westerner, thought that I was disadvantaged in the sense I had to start from scratch. Everything about Buddhism was foreign. But then I discovered there were some ways in which that it was an advantage. A lot of people there grew up with parents who had told them all kinds of strange things about who the Buddha was and what he taught. To practice, they had to clear those misunderstandings away. I had to clear my misunderstandings away. We had this common ground that made the other person's misunderstandings and background really interesting.

So this is what the Dhamma stresses: We all have something in common. We're all suffering and we're all suffering in basically the same ways. We could help one another along wherever our particular problems in getting the mind into this common ground are similar—or even when they're different. That gives you a new perspective on what your problems are. So we focus on the common ground and that way we can get out of ourselves and get out of our worlds because it's in the process of creating a self in a particular world of experience that we suffer. That's called becoming.

As the Buddha says, all the cravings that lead to becoming are going to make you suffer, whether they're sensual cravings, craving for becoming, or craving even for non-becoming, when you want to destroy a particular becoming. That, too, leads to becoming. So the basic structure is all the same. When we take on the four noble truths, the Buddha's telling us to step out. To begin with, we learn to look at experience not in terms of who we are, or what the world is like, but simply in terms of what are the processes that are going on in the mind, going on

inside the body that are giving rise to suffering? Can you engage in those processes, not in ignorance—which is going to cause suffering—but with knowledge? That's one way in which you step out.

And then finally, when the path leads to something timeless, something deathless, you really step out, you actually step out of space and time entirely. In doing so, you see, though, that it's true that your engagement with space and time didn't start with the day you were born in this lifetime. You may not know the details of previous lifetimes, but you have this sense of time going way back, and now you're out. That, too, is common ground for everybody who reaches the end of the path.

So as we focus on what we have in common, we can pull ourselves out of the particulars of our suffering. And the freedom that results is the same for everyone.