Same but Different, but Same

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Chan Phuong once quoted a teaching from a Chan Mon 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. His only comment was, “Take that and think it over.” And 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. 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 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 it were all a one-size-fits-all kind of dharma, the Buddha would have had maybe just one or two techniques. A few short teachings, and that would have been it. But look at what we’ve got—forty-five volumes. That’s just the Canon. Not all of that comes from the Buddha, but a huge percentage does, or seems to, at least. Lots of different tactics for getting at our many different tactics for suffering. But the basic outlines are all the same. This is where it gets deeper. We suffer in clinging and craving. The suffering itself is clinging to the five aggregates, and there’s just a general thirst and desire to feed on things. That’s the cause of suffering. This is true across all religions. Across the board. And the path contains the same elements. There’s virtue, there’s concentration, and there’s discernment. So regardless of your nationality, regardless of the type of mental illness you suffer from, 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 suffering, to your own particular situation. It’s like you have this huge medicine chest, and you know you have an illness and you have a general idea of what the illness is, but you may not really understand the specifics. So it requires taking some different medicines and 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 of suffering with lots of individual misunderstandings. I noticed that when Ajahn Furon would be teaching people, at the very beginning it was like he had a whole toolbox full of different ways of teaching. Some people found it difficult to gain concentration, but discernment was difficult. 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 were settled down, they’d start having visions and other weird sensations. So you’d have to herd them into the middle path from all directions. So if someone was off to the left of the path, they’d have to say, “Go right.” Other people off to the right of the path, they’d have to say, “Go left.” But as the path progressed, you began to see more and more, especially when people got to the point where they really could get their minds to settle down and really be still, the point where the breath filled the body, the breath filled the mind. Your awareness filled the body and the breath got so calm that you couldn’t sense any coming in and out. You were fully aware of the body, but you didn’t sense the in-and-outness of the breath. There was no in-and-out movement. 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 he asks other monks, “What were you contemplating when you finally broke through to the Dhamma? When you had your first glimpse of the Dhamma or the awakening of the Dhamma-I?” One monk said he was contemplating the five aggregates. Another monk said he was contemplating dependent-core rising. Another monk was contemplating the elements, the properties. The six sense mediums. He got very confused. Then he went to see the Buddha, and the Buddha said, “Well, it’s like a riddle tree. Apparently, there’s a tree in Asia which looks very different at different times of the year. And so, depending on which season you see the tree, your description of the tree is going to be very different. It has red flowers at a point where it has no leaves. Other times, it’s full of leaves. Other times, it’s full of seeds. Other times, it’s totally barren. And so, if you were to describe the tree at the point where you saw it, you’d come up with many different descriptions. In the same way, different people will find different topics conducive. But the important element is to get the monk mind to settle down. To get the mind to settle down, you have to find a topic that you find congenial. Some people find just simply repeating a word over and over in the mind, like bhutto, 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. Just visualize where your bones are. Visualize the different parts of the body, taking them apart one by one and putting them in a pile on the floor around you. There’s no one-size-fits-all, 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. And those insights are important, but they will be your own individual insights. It’s not the tree’s fault. Once you do concentration, and only when your concentration is really good, then you gain insight into the mind. You’ve got to have some insight into how the mind works. 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 find that you come up with different answers. That’s what someone else might come up with, because you have your own particular clingings. You have your own particular cravings. This is all very much an individual matter. That’s one of the reasons why Ajaan Fuang had as a basic principle that he asked 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 you’ve got to look at your own particular ways of creating suffering within that general framework. And a lot of the practice is just recognizing old friends, quote-unquote. All the little animals you’ve been feeding all the time, since who knows when. Issues from childhood, issues from 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 and 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 say,”Well, you don’t stir them up. They just come up on their own.” Well, when they come up on their own, why do you then carry them on, take them on again? A little blip comes up in the mind and all of a sudden you’re back who knows where, thirty years ago, twenty years ago. Then you run with it. The fact that it appears in your mind, that’s old karma. You’re running with it and reviving the issue and getting all entangled in it. 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 begin to see common patterns. Again, this pattern of your tendency to feed on things. It’s the feeding that constitutes the suffering. The word upadana for clinging also means sustenance, the act of taking sustenance. It’s like the sustenance that a tree gets from soil, the sustenance that a fire gets from its fuel. We suffer in our feelings. We’re 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. So to get over this, we don’t simply deny ourselves. That’s the old tactic that the Buddha tried for a while. He’d been indulging in pleasure 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 say, “There really is a problem here.” He didn’t say, “Well, 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. It’s the mind that’s obsessed with these things. The body would be perfectly content to die. When it’s hungry, it has pangs, but 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. It’s the mind that gets upset by these things. It’s the mind that’s feeding. So he didn’t say that. He realized, “Okay, there’s something wrong here with this desire. Now I’ve got to do something about it.” His first way of doing it was to totally deny it. He starved himself until it was skin and bones. And he realized, he had the good sense to realize, that that wasn’t the way out either. You can’t starve the mind that’s suffering. You just start to suffer in different ways. It starts feeding in different ways. The person who engages in this self-denial of that sort usually has a lot of pride, and 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. 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, a sense of ease. The breath feels good coming in, going out, and it 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 of the pleasure, the ease of the ease, and ultimately just the equanimity that comes 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. Dispassion doesn’t mean that you hate them. It simply means that you look at them and say, “I don’t need to feed on that anymore.” This miserable food and the act of feeding itself was a miserable act of feeding. Because most of the ways we feed, we’re really ashamed of. It involves some harm, either to ourselves or to 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 get the mind to settle down and you indulge in it. You really enjoy it. Without that enjoyment, you can’t let go of your other attachments. That’s one of the deeper ways in which the practice for everyone is all like. Individual insights start out as very personal things, but then you get deeper and deeper and more into just 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 you 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, but because you’ve fed it really well. You find an aspect of the mind that doesn’t need to feed, or something that’s touched at the mind that doesn’t need to feed. 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 these things 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 we’re on a very deep level. alike.

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