

Expanded Possibilities

April 28, 2020

This is the time of year of anniversaries. Recently we had the anniversary of Ajaan Suwat's passing away, Loong Loong's passing away, and Ajaan Lee's passing away. Next month, it'll be the anniversary of Ajaan Fuang's passing away. Today is the anniversary of my having met Ajaan Fuang 46 years ago. I've been thinking about what it was that had me convinced, within a day or two after meeting him, that he was my teacher, and why it was so satisfying to stay with him. A large part of it had to do with a sense of expanded possibilities I got being around him.

Looking back on my training—my religious training, my background in Western culture, both secular and religious—I had come with a very limited sense of the possibilities of what a human being can do, what kind of happiness was possible, what level of certainty was reasonable. Happiness seemed to be something that could be so easily shaken, so easily shattered. As for certainty, the people who I knew who tended to be the most certain were also the most narrow.

But Ajaan Fuang opened new possibilities. His certainty was not narrow at all. He was one of the most clear-sighted people I'd ever met, and yet, at the same time, the most solid. His was a solidity that came not from desperately hanging on to a belief, but having arrived at something. And, as he said, what he had was nothing that he was born with. It was something he had learned, the training he had received from Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Mun, which meant that it was something that other human beings could master as well, if they put in the effort.

This was the other part—realizing that human effort was not wasted, human effort was not futile, and the possibilities of what a human being can know were greatly expanded. I've told you the story of a Buddhist scholar who was complaining that he could understand the sense of peace that the Buddha achieved on the night of his awakening—he saw it as a kind of an equanimity—but he didn't understand the idea that on the night of the Buddha's passing away he'd obtained something unconditioned, because, as the scholar said, human beings are conditioned beings, so how can a human being know what's unconditioned? But that was the opposite of the Buddha's approach.

The Buddha didn't start out with the definition of what you are and then, from that, come to a conclusion about what you can know. He looked first at skills: What can a human being do? Then, in the course of mastering the skills, in the course of training the mind, he looked at what you can learn about the mind, and what you can come to know. He found that there's something deathless that

can be attained through human effort. He looked back and realized that if you identify yourself or define yourself too quickly, you limit yourself. So his focus was on skills, what a human being can do.

And that's where we expand our possibilities: realizing that we can develop skills that can take us beyond where we are right now. This opens a wide world of possibilities. It also places a lot of responsibility on us.

That was the scary part of meeting Ajaan Fuang, realizing that there are these possibilities that can be done, but that they're going to require a lot of work. But still it's good work. Virtue, concentration, discernment: These are all good things. The qualities of mind that can be developed as you practice are all good things.

Prior to meeting Ajaan Fuang, I'd always wondered if someone who attained nibbana would be dead or defeated—in other words, seeing that there was nothing worth desiring in the world, so you just give up on desire. But with Ajaan Fuang, I saw that that was not the case. He'd learned to re-channel his desires and actually found something that was eminently desirable. And so in that case, his lack of desire for the things of the world was not defeatist or sour grapes. It was because he'd found something better.

So it's always good to keep this in mind: that genuine lack of desire doesn't come from denying your desires, or telling yourself, "Well, I just have to learn how to accept things as they are, because otherwise if I struggle against them, struggle is going to be stressful, and stressfulness is something that weighs on the mind."

There is stress, there is pain in the practice, but it's for a purpose. Think of the Buddha's image: If you could have a deal where they would spear you with a hundred spears in the morning, a hundred spears at noon, and a hundred spears in the evening, every day for a hundred years, but at the end you'd be guaranteed awakening, it would be a good deal to accept. And when awakening did come, you wouldn't think it had been attained through pain. It'd been attained through joy. The experience would be that total. The bliss would be that total. So effort is well expended if it's expended in the right way.

There's right view and there's wrong view. There's right resolve and wrong resolve, all the way down through the factors of the path to right concentration and wrong concentration. You act in the wrong way, you're not going to get results—like trying to get milk out of a cow by squeezing its horn. If you act in the right way, you're going to get the results. It's like pulling on the udder. If you decide, "Well, I've been squeezing, squeezing, squeezing this horn. I'm not getting anywhere. I might as well decide there's no milk to be gained, and be happy just sitting here. It's easier than squeezing the horn, that's for sure." But you still don't get the milk. And there is milk. It is attainable.

So don't listen to the people who say that the effort put into the practice is wasted or that it's going to be a form of stress, and you can learn how to avoid stress by just not doing anything. That's defeatist. That's dead, whereas the Buddha's path is path of victory. It's alive. It does require work. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how when he was a young monk, he was afraid of putting effort into the practice for fear that it wouldn't yield results. It was only after meeting Ajaan Mun that he realized, okay, there are results in this world. He gave himself totally to the practice. I had a similar feeling with Ajaan Fuang.

The world opened up. There were more possibilities than I had imagined before. Part of this came from sensing his psychic abilities—he seemed very quick to read my mind—but also his wisdom and compassion. He never bragged about his powers. He never talked about them. But they were there, and he used them well. And it was the wisdom and compassion with which he used them that convinced me that he was the kind of person I wanted to trust, and could trust. The example of his life was that it is possible to be certain and not be narrow, and not be blind—to be certain with an all-around eye. As he said, Ajaan Lee had shown him the brightness of the world, and the brightness was not in ordinary, everyday activities. The brightness was going deep into the mind and seeing there is this possibility.

After all, the four noble truths are four truths. It's not just suffering, suffering, suffering, suffering. Four separate truths, and there is that truth of the end of suffering. And the path, even though it takes a lot of work, is worth every bit of it.

So as we face a world that's been changed by this virus, in which a lot of our economic possibilities are going to be restricted, social possibilities are going to be restricted for quite a while, remember that there are expanded possibilities in the mind. They've always been there. But it's good to know that we're not restricted in all directions, in all dimensions.

The way to awakening is wide open. There's no competition on the path, nobody to get in the way, only your own defilements. That's the scary part—knowing that you're going to have to clean them out yourself. You can't take your defilements with you to nibbana. Think of that story of Ajaan Lee taking his students by train to a place where they were going to meditate. They met at the train station in Bangkok, and he saw that many of them had lots of luggage. They had expected that porters would carry the luggage for them. So he just set out walking along the railroad tracks. So when the ajaan walks, everybody else has to walk, too, and very quickly people started complaining: "Why was he making them walk when they had so much luggage?" At first, he didn't say anything. Then he said, "Well, if it's heavy and it's a burden, throw it away. Let it go." And so

people stopped, rearranged their luggage, threw away what they didn't need. There were lotus ponds next to the railroad track there in Bangkok at the time. So everything excessive got thrown into the ponds. What was left was just what they needed. They got to the next station, he saw that their burdens were a lot lighter, so that's when they got on the train.

In the same way, we have a lot of stuff we have to clean out. But it's good work. And it's not wasted. The results are solid. It was gaining a sense of this: that's what made me realize that Ajaan Fuang was going to be my teacher. And the question then was: Was I going to be up to it? And I ultimately decided that if I didn't give it a try, I was going to regret it for the rest of my life. So I followed it. And that's a decision I've never regretted.