

## *Control*

*August 14, 2006*

When the Buddha first talked about the concept of not-self, he focused on the issue of control, because basically that's what our sense of self comes down to—the things we can control in life: the happiness we can create, and the things we use to create happiness, create pleasure, create a sense of well-being for ourselves and sometimes for the people around us. But the important thing is the control.

The Buddha points out how all the things we use to create a sense of self ultimately lie beyond our control. Forms arise, but they have to pass away; the same for feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. You can't always say, "I want my body to be like this. I want my feelings to be like that," and expect them to be that way. Simply telling them to do things doesn't necessarily make them do it. You can tell the body not to grow old, but it doesn't listen to you. If you gain a sense of peace in the concentration and you say, "I want this to last. I don't want anything else ever to come," that doesn't happen. Ultimately, these things do lie outside our control.

But on a less than ultimate level, we *do* have some control over them. For a certain period of life, if you want to raise your hand, it actually will go up. If you want to feed yourself, you can find food. This gives us the illusion of control, or ultimate control, which is a problem. But also it means that we do have some control in life, so we should learn how to make use of what we've got control over while we have that control and put it to a good use. This is why we can practice.

Ajaan Suwat once gave a Dhamma talk on how karma is not not-self. You don't ever see the Buddha saying that your karma is not-self. The results of karma are not-self. Once you've done something, the results lie outside your control. You've set a series of conditions in motion and now you can't call them back. But while you're making the decision to act, that's something you *are* responsible for. You do have control there. So, he says, focus your attention on the area where you do have control and make the most of it. You can choose to cause suffering. You can choose to cause temporary happiness. You can choose to cause lasting happiness. You could choose to find the end of suffering. These are choices you can make.

So don't spend your time getting upset about things you can't control and focus on the things you can. The practice is meant to give you a sense of where that dividing line is. It'll shift over time. There's that passage in the Canon where King Pasenadi says that when he was young, he felt he had the strength of two

men, but now that he's old, he wants to put his foot in one spot and it goes someplace else. Even his own body gets uncontrollable in that way. He has thoughts that wander in and wander out, and all these other problems—and he's a king. Kings have more control than we do, to some extent. But ultimately they, too, have to lose control. A good part of the practice is learning to see where that shifting line between control and lack of control lies at any particular point and then focusing on the that area you can control.

You can choose right now to focus on the breath. If the mind slips off, you can choose to come back. With every breath, you have the opportunity to choose what you're going to do with that breath, what you're going to do with the strength that comes from that breath.

So it's wise to have a clear sense of priorities. What do you really want out of life? Where are you really going to look for happiness? Then dedicate your efforts in that direction. As for things that lie beyond your control, be willing to let them go because your holding on to them is illusory anyhow. You're holding on to an idea that has really nothing to do with reality. And that's not helpful at all. It doesn't accomplish anything, and it wastes the energy you could apply to what's within your powers.

This is one of the lessons of the sublime attitudes. You wish for happiness in general. You wish for those who are suffering to be freed from their suffering. As for those who are happy, you hope that they learn how to maintain their happiness. But then there are a lot of cases in this world where people are suffering and you can't do a thing about it. It's totally beyond your control. There are people who are happy and they abuse their happiness. That, too, is beyond your control. That's where you have to develop equanimity. In other words, let go of the things you can't control so that you can focus your energy on the things you can. This is how the not-self teaching gets applied through the practice even when you're not ready for the ultimate level where you totally abandon any thought of self.

You learn to pare down your notion of self to the areas where it's actually useful. And the Buddha does have lots of things to say about a useful sense of self. As he says, the self is its own mainstay. Who else could be your mainstay? When you gain yourself as a mainstay—in other words, when you learn to depend on yourself in the areas where you do have some control—you gain a refuge or a mainstay, he says, that's hard to find. In other passages, he says that the self has to learn how to warn itself, to teach itself, to bring itself to its senses—because you can't depend on other people to do that for you. Some people may try, but it's really you yourself who has to make up your mind what you're going to do with

your life—what’s important, what’s not. So in those areas, you have to develop a skillful sense of self and learn how to let go of anything else that would get in the way.

You could say that the teaching on not-self begins with the teaching on *dana*—generosity, giving—because that’s where the Buddha would always start when he was teaching people brand new to the teaching. He wanted to bring them up to the level of the four noble truths. He would start them with generosity, something that they had had experience with—knowing that when you give up something you’re going to get something better in return, a better kind of happiness. The happiness that could come from, say, eating some food is much less satisfying than the happiness that comes from knowing that you gave the food away to somebody who made good use of it. You appreciate the quality of mind that arises as a result. You see its importance. You see its value. If you can’t see that value, you’d be very hard to teach. It’d be hard for you to appreciate the Dhamma, because the Dhamma is based on the principle of the good that comes from giving up things you’ve been holding on to. It may be hard, but when you do it right, you realize that you gain something better in return—maybe a little bit less tangible, but a lot more lasting.

Then that teaching works inward, inward, inward until ultimately you can give up your attachment to your body. You give up your attachment to your feelings, thought constructs, perceptions, consciousness. Ajaan Maha Boowa once said that when you finally get to the end of the path, you look back and you see that it was the same principle all the way down the line. Luang Pu Dune once said, “The Dhamma is one thing clear through.” It’s the principle of learning where to let things go and finding that there’s a happiness you get in return that you don’t have to create. It comes from the letting go that’s naturally there, learning to appreciate it, learning to make the most of it.

But the Buddha does have you let go in stages. It’s only when you’re totally ready that he says, “Okay, all sense of self has to go.” That includes even your karma, even your choices. You bring the mind to a point of equilibrium where you know that any choice you make, either staying there or going out of that point, would bring on more stress. That’s where you totally let go of karma, where you totally let go of any sense of self.

But before you get to that point, don’t just let go of everything. You don’t want to let go of the path yet. Hold on to the path, like a raft going across the river: As long as you’re still in the middle of the river, don’t let go of the raft. You let it go only when you’ve reached the other side. Otherwise, if you want to make

a show of how totally unattached you are and you get up and dance around on the raft, you fall off and get swept down the river.

So a lot of insight and a lot of discernment lies in knowing exactly what you can control and what you still need to control for the sake of the path, holding on to that and letting go of everything else that gets in the way—and particularly, letting go of any idea of trying to bring things that are beyond your control back under your control.

This is why discernment requires two eyes. As Ajaan Lee once said, “You see that things are not-self and you know they ultimately are not-self, but you have to ask yourself, “What kind of self can I create out of them in the meantime that’s actually useful?” You can create the self that follows a path, the self that knows how to do concentration, the self that can deal with difficult situations. You use that sense of self until you don’t need it anymore. That, as he said, is how you find self in not-self.

Or as Ajaan Suwat would say, you focus on karma because that’s the area where a skillful self can be put to use. Then, like any tool when you’re done with it, you can set it aside, because you’ve found the freedom where issues of control or lack of control no longer have any meaning.