

## *Owning Your Actions*

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Ajaan Suwat liked to call attention to a contrast in two points in the Buddha's teachings. On the one hand, the teaching about *anatta*: that the aggregates are not you. But then the passage on karma: We're the owners of our actions.

That's something we're responsible for: what we choose to do. And it's good to make a distinction. A lot of things happen to us, and we have to write that off as past karma. But we don't want to focus on that. We want to focus on the power we have to change things now with our actions.

This is why, of the ajaans' Dhamma talks, I'd say eighty percent are basically pep talks. The people they were teaching in Thailand, especially back in the time of Ajaan Mun, were all children of peasants. They were at the bottom rung of the society. The hierarchy in Bangkok didn't even notice them. Yet all the great ajaans, both the monks and the nuns, came from poor families. When you read the few talks we have of Ajaan Mun's that are recorded, you can see that he's basically saying: Look, you've got everything you need in order to find awakening. You've got a body; you've got a mind. You've got those five aggregates that you can do something good with. Even though you may not have them totally under your control, at least you have some control over them. So while you've got that control, put it to good use. Focus on what you *can* do with what you've got, rather than the limitations that come either from within or from without.

Ajaan Maha Boowa would make a similar observation. People getting old: You find that you can't do as much as you could in the past. Well, figure out what you still *can* do. Make the most of what you've got. Squeeze some goodness out of what's still able to function. You find that there's still some use in these old bones.

So the focus is placed less on what you're experiencing from the outside than on what you're deciding to do from within. That's where your attention should be focused. It starts with the precepts and then moves on in.

When the Buddha wanted to teach the Dhamma to his son, he started out by saying, "Look at your thoughts, your words and your deeds, before you do them, while you're doing them, and after they're done, to see what results you expect or are noticing as you're acting or you notice after everything's done. Try to avoid anything that you know is going to be harmful. And if you see that something is unexpectedly harmful, then talk it over with someone who's more advanced on the path."

In other words, he's saying: Try not to make a mistake, but if you do make

mistakes, this is what you do. This is how you learn from your mistakes.

The same principle then moves on into the meditation. There's the image of the cook who prepares food for a king or a king's minister. He notices, what does the king like today? What does he reach for? Does he like sour food or salty food? Or bland food, hot food, spicy food? Then you make more of that.

And it's the same with the mind. As the Buddha said, you try to notice when the mind settles down: why it settles down, where it settles down. When it's not settling down, ask yourself, "What could be changed?"

This is why it's good to stop and reflect after each session of meditation, "What went well? When the mind was settled down, where was it focused? What was the breath like at the time? What had you been doing leading up to that?" In the beginning it's hard to notice, but after a while you begin to gain a sense of what's working. You start looking for these things and you realize that meditation is a kind of karma.

When the Buddha was talking to Rahula about thoughts, words, and deeds, the section on thoughts had to do with the meditation. Are you getting the results you want out of your meditation? If not, what can you change? Do you want to change the breath? How about changing the point where you're focused? Or if the mind is unwilling to settle down with the breath, ask yourself, "What's bothering it right now?" Because there are reflections that you can use to get the mind in the right mood.

This is one of the reasons why we start the meditation session with the chants: sometimes on the body; always on goodwill; sometimes on the fact that we're subject to aging, illness, and death, and all we've got to hold on to is our karma. It's to get you thinking in the right mode for being willing to settle down.

On days when you're feeling lazy, you might want to think about death. Death could come at any time—after all, we are in California. The Big One could happen without warning. Even if we're not in California, the body's just primed to go at any time: Something goes a little bit wrong with your heart, and that's it.

The Buddha has you think, every time the sun goes down: This could be the last sunset you see. It may be your last night. Are you ready to go? If not, work on the qualities of the mind that you know are going to be problems. The same with the sunrise in the morning: This could be your last sunrise, are you ready to go? Of course, as they say in those billboards in Nevada, "Today is not a good day to die," but if it's the day, what are you going to do? You have to prepare.

So there are ways of thinking that can bring your mind back to the breath, because it's when you're with the breath that you can be in the present moment and see what the mind is doing in the present moment. What are its intentions?

Often its intentions are buried, yet these are the things shaping our lives. It's like handing your car keys over to somebody you don't know.

So you want to look carefully right here, right now. Any intention to move away from the breath at this point should be suspect. You want to stay right here, stay right here.

And make it a good place to stay. Gain a sense of what kind of breathing is good for you when you're tired, what kind of breathing is good for you when you're on edge, what kind of breathing is good when you're drowsy.

You want to be careful. As the breath gets more comfortable, gets more refined, it's very easy to slip off. So as soon as things get comfortable, start spreading your awareness around different parts of the body. You want to establish a large frame of reference here. Be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out.

Think of the range of your awareness as like a screen on a big window. Things come passing in but they go right through. The wind comes through the screen but it doesn't move the screen around, and the screen doesn't catch the wind. Open, centered, the sense of being spacious and at ease: That's the quality you want, because that allows you to see a lot of things in the mind that you wouldn't see otherwise. Sometimes they're good things; sometimes they're not. You learn to accept what you've got for the purpose of working with it.

But in the beginning you want to make sure that you're well-settled, well-settled. Anything that comes up: For the time being, just put it aside. If there are issues in your life that you want to contemplate, save them for the very end of the session. Give yourself five or ten minutes at the end and say, "Okay, now the mind is clearer, more settled, less hungry, so you can pick up whatever issue it is." You might pose the issue in your mind before you sit down and say, "This is something I want to think about at the end. What's the solution?" Then just put the issue aside and don't touch it during the hour. Then when the hour is up, okay, bring it up. See what the mind has to say.

But for right now, the breath is where you want to be. While you're practicing concentration, make a law for yourself that anything that's not related to the topic of your concentration is going to be unskillful. Even when you're with the breath, you want to notice, "Is there any disturbance in here?" Once things start settling down and you feel secure here, ask yourself, "Could this be more refined? More settled? More unified?"

This is the quality of ardency that the Buddha talks about in mindfulness practice: the heartfelt desire to do this well. And of course, this all relates to the four noble truths, which is the Buddha's teaching on how the suffering that

weighs the mind down comes from within.

So meditation is always a matter of looking back at what you're doing and the results of what you're doing.

This is why, when the Buddha wanted to express his awakening in as few words as possible, he defined it as insight into a principle of causality. Some things you experience right now are caused by things in the past. Other things are caused by things you're doing right now. Those are the ones you can watch. And how do you know which is which? By trying to change what you do right now and see what changes as a result.

As you get more sensitive to this area right here in the present moment, you begin to see that certain ways of focusing are more secure than others. Certain ways of focusing are less stressful than others. Certain ways of breathing give you a greater sense of energy, a greater sense of well-being. These are all things you can shape in the present moment. And you're trying to shape them well.

That's what the four noble truths are all about: Let go of the things that are causing unnecessary stress; develop the qualities that are going to allow you to see where the stress is and what you're doing that's causing it. They're meant as guidelines to action, these four noble truths.

So from the beginning to the end the Buddha's teachings are all about action, and particularly the kind of action that leads to the end of action. In other words, it takes the mind to a dimension where nothing has to be created, nothing has to be fabricated, nothing has to be put together. There there's no stress, no suffering at all. That's where it's all headed. And it starts right here with noticing what you're doing.

So be clear about what you're doing and try to do it well.