

## *A Good Place to Not-Self*

*July 5, 2019*

There's that contrast in the chants we repeat in the evening before we meditate. There's the chant on aging, illness, death, and separation. Then there's the chant that says, "May I be happy." In the context of aging, illness, and death, that wish for happiness seems a little hopeless, but it's not. It's why we're here, because that original chant doesn't stop with aging, illness, death, and separation. It goes on to talk about your actions.

Your actions do have a power to shape your life, and you want to do them well. In fact, the Buddha says, actions can become so skillful that you get to the point where you find something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die.

So where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. Those chants simply remind us that if you're looking for happiness, you have to look at the causes and not latch onto the effects. This body we have and the situation we're in come from our actions. If you try to hold onto these things without really thinking about how skillful your actions are, you're going to get into trouble.

You want to focus on the mind that's doing the actions, the mind that's making the intentions, and then train that well. Ajaan Suwat made this point. He said the Buddha talks about all the things that are not-self, which are the results of actions. He said the Buddha, however, does say that we're the owners of our actions. That's what we're responsible for. So you set good things in motion but you don't try to latch onto the results. You keep focusing on the fact that you've got to return to what you're doing right here, right now. And you want to make sure you do it skillfully. That's the meaning of the not-self teaching.

A lot of people are scared off by the teaching on not-self. It sounds like the Buddha's saying we have no self, that there's nothingness, nothing to us, or that we have to deny ourselves. That's not the case. He's simply asking you to focus on what's really worthy of your full attention and to be careful that you don't latch onto things that could make you behave in unskillful ways. We fight so much for our survival, we fight for maintaining relationships, and often we do very unskillful things that set bad conditions into motion.

So you want to turn around and focus on the source. Make sure the source is creating something good, and everything else will get taken care of. The source is right here, which is why we meditate right here. We don't meditate on big abstractions. We focus on something simple like the breath. It's right here, right

next to the mind. When you've got the mind with the breath, then you can see it clearly.

So take a good long deep in-and-out breath and notice where you feel the breathing in the body. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't feel good, you can change. This is one of the nice things about the breath. It's an automatic function of the body, but it's also one that you can have some control over. So try to learn how to exert some skillful control. What kind of breathing would feel really good right now? If you're feeling tired, what kind of breathing would be energizing? If you're feeling tense, what kind of breathing would be more relaxing? You can try short, long, heavy, light, deep, shallow, fast, slow. There are lots of ways of working with the breath in the body, lots of different ways of perceiving the breath in the body.

It's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the flow of energy that goes through the chest, goes through the stomach. If you're very sensitive, you can sense it in any part of the body, the flow of energy that allows the air to come in, go out. Any thoughts that are not related to the breath, just let them go because you don't want to get involved in any narratives that would pull you away. If you do get pulled away, just drop the thought and you'll be right back here. If you get pulled away again, as soon as you notice you're pulled away, drop the thought and you'll be back here again.

It's normal when you're getting started that there will be distracting thoughts going through the mind, but each time you catch yourself, you're strengthening a quality called alertness. You're watching what you're doing, seeing clearly what you're doing. That's a quality you want to develop if you want to understand your own mind. So you practice it with the breath. At the same time, you're developing mindfulness: the ability to keep something in mind. In this case, keep in mind what you want to do. And if you've had any experience meditating, you know what helps and what doesn't help with the mind, so remember that, too. Apply it.

As for issues that came up in the course of the day that are not related to the breath, you don't want to remember those for the time being. Just put them aside. Thoughts of who did what to you, or what you did to other people, just spread thoughts of goodwill to everybody because when you're looking for happiness here, there's no competition. When you're out in the world, there's a lot of competition, a lot of one-upsmanship and worse, because everything in the world seems to have its owner and if you want to find your happiness in things out there you're going to have to fight off a few other owners. But here this is *your* breath. These are *your* actions. They're not anybody else's. When you're looking for

happiness here, it's a lot easier to have goodwill for everybody because you're not competing with anyone.

It's like that image of Mercury in *The Sirens of Titan*, where the animals live off the vibrations of the planet. They don't have to feed off of one another as animals do on Earth. There's plenty of space throughout the planet for everybody to find a place with good vibes. So they send messages of goodwill to one another. When you look for your happiness inside, you find it a lot easier to live with other people in the world, because you don't have to compete. You've got a good source of happiness right here and that's actually a much better happiness than the things outside—the word “outside” here meaning anything beginning with your body and going out. So bring an attitude of goodwill to yourself and goodwill for everybody, and focus here to get to know this area of your awareness as thoroughly as possible.

When the breath starts feeling comfortable, there may be a tendency to start drifting off as the mind gravitates toward the comfort rather than to the breath. So to counteract that tendency, the next step is to think about the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, and relax the whole body around the breathing process. That will allow the feelings of ease in the breath to spread down the nerves, down the blood vessels. You can think of those feelings of ease spreading out to every pore of the skin. If you're really sensitive, it feels like the whole body's breathing. Then try to maintain that sense of whole body: whole-body awareness, a whole-body feeling of pleasure, the whole body breathing. It helps to anchor your awareness here in the present moment.

If your range of awareness is small, it's like a little tiny bead that can slip off to the future, slip off to the past, as if thoughts going to the future and the past had to slip through a little tube. But here your awareness is so large that it can't fit through the tube. You're fully here in the present moment, anchored in the present moment. This is where you can see things clearly because those actions that shape your life, where do they come from? They come from right here.

Your intentions right here in the present moment are part of the mind that we're all too rarely aware of. Many times when you ask someone, “Why did you do x?” they have to stop and think for a bit. The intention wasn't all that clear. And yet it's your intentions that shape your actions. Your actions shape your life. So it's just plain common sense: Pay careful attention to your intentions and get the mind here in the present moment as much as you can so that you can see the quality of thinking that goes into those intentions. Anything that would pull you away from this, you have to say, “Well, that's not me right now.” That's what the meaning of not-self is.

If you try to identify with something that's going to make you behave in an unskillful way, you've got to learn how to look at the identification as an action. It was a choice you made. Often, it was a choice that was made without much awareness. But now that you're more aware of what's going on in the mind, you can see it. And you can choose not to keep making that identification.

When the Buddha talks about your self, he doesn't answer the question of whether you have a self or don't have a self. But he says you are engaged in what he calls "I-making" and "my-making." You create your sense of what's important to you, what you want to hold onto, your sense of what you're able to do. You're constantly creating these different selves based on different desires. And if the desire is unskillful, is that a self you want to keep in your stable? The answer should be No.

So in the meantime, you create another set of skills around the meditation: your self as a meditator; your self as someone who's mindful and alert. And that can change the balance of power inside. When you're not spending so much time competing outside, it's a lot easier to let go of a lot of the selves that hang onto that competition or are based on that competition. At the very least, if you do have to compete, which is a normal part of everyday life, you learn how to take those selves and pick them up and put them down. If you find that they start getting unskillful, you can put them down because you see that they're activities. They're things you do. They're not something you're stuck with. They're actions you choose to do. When you can see that they're unskillful and unnecessary, then you can let them go.

This is one of the advantages of meditation: It gives you an alternative place to stand. It gives you a sense of well-being inside that requires no competition whatsoever. So you can look at the competitions of life and decide, well, which ones do you really want to get involved with? What are the long-term consequences? When the Buddha says you develop insight and discernment in the meditation, it's just that: You're able to see long-term consequences and make your choices based on that long-term view. You're in a position where you can look at the long term.

It's like someone who's well fed who's able to look off a little bit further into the future than people who don't have anything to eat at all. If you have nothing to eat, you're constantly scrambling for this, scrambling for that. You get what you can take, however you can take it. But if you're well fed, you can be a little bit more discriminating, a bit wiser about where you're going to look for your food.

Meditation is food for the mind. At the same time, it makes your insight into what's going on in the mind right here a lot clearer. So take some time to be with

the breath and allow the breath to be comfortable. Allow that sense of comfort to spread throughout the body and then do what you can to maintain that sense of full-body comfort, full-body breathing, full-body awareness because it puts you in a much better position to decide: What do you really want in life? What's really important? What do you really want to hold onto? What's worth letting go? This way the different battles that go on in the mind about what you want, what you don't want, get sorted out because you're standing in a better place. The spaces of well-being inside that you can create very simply by being mindful and alert to the breath, relating to the body, relating to the mind in a way that's a lot more skillful, give you a foundation for a lot more skillful actions as you go into the world.