

The Limits of Control

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They say they've found that when they stimulate a certain part of your brain, you can feel a very strong sense of oneness; your sense of boundary between yourself and the world outside dissolves. There's a very satisfying sense that you're one with everything you're aware of. Of course, this doesn't mean you really are one. The brain is just sending that signal. The question is: What use is that perception? If you're feeling one with things, can you change them to be better? Can you exert control over them? And even though there may be a sense of wellbeing that comes with that oneness, how lasting is it?

The Buddha himself pointed out that the highest sense of oneness is the sense of consciousness being totally one and single, when everything in the range of your consciousness becomes one. But, he said, even in that sense of oneness, there is inconstancy. There is stress. It's not totally under your control.

He also said that the idea that you are one with the world, or you're one with the cosmos, is the most ridiculous self-view there is. After all, if you are one with something, or it really is you, you should be able to control it, get it to do what you want. All you have to do is think, and there it goes: It changes in line with the thought. And if something is you, then it's also going to be yours. If you're at one with everything, then the piece of land next to ours is yours. The cars in the parking lot are yours. Everything that comes along should be yours. But it's not. Try to go and exert your ownership over land or the cars, and a lot of people will fight you off.

So the sense of oneness may be a nice state of concentration, a very relaxing sense of wellbeing, but beyond that, it doesn't really mean anything. It doesn't have any truth value, and it's certainly not the end of suffering.

A more useful way of looking at your sense of self is looking at where you do exert control. Ajaan Suwat once made a comparison between two of the passages we chant here regularly. On the one hand, there's the passage we chanted just now: *Anabhissaro*: there is no one in charge. *Assako loko*, the world has nothing of its own, which means there is nothing of *your* own either, nothing worthy of calling you or yours. But we also have another chant, *Kammassakomhi*, I'm the owner of my actions. Your actions are yours. As Ajaan Suwat said, think about that. There's a very useful teaching in that paradox. We do have the power to exert control over our intentions right now. And our intentions do shape our experience of the world around us, the world inside us, at least to some extent: enough to make the difference between suffering and not suffering.

What we're experiencing right now is the result of past intentions, plus our current intentions, plus the results of our current intentions. Even though we may not have absolute control over things, and will ultimately have to let them all go, we do have some control over our actions now. And you want to make the most of that fact. You want to be able to fabricate a path to the end of suffering out of your intentions, while you have the ability to do so, because ultimately there comes a point where you have to let go of everything here, and go on to who knows where.

So what we are doing as we're meditating is to find out exactly how much control we can exert over form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. This is the point of all the aspects of the practice. Generosity, for instance: One of your first experiences of freedom is when you have something that's yours, but you decide you want to give it away, not because you have to or you're expected to, but simply because you want to share it with someone else. That's your first sense that you're not totally a slave to your desires, totally a slave to your greed. You're free to say No to them, and a higher pleasure comes as a result. This is a very skillful way to exercise control.

The same with the precepts: You can say No to your desire to harm someone else, No to your desire to harm yourself, No even to actions that seem pleasant in the short-term but in the long-term cause harm.

Then there's the useful sense of control, the skillful sense of control, when you're practicing concentration. You're taking those five aggregates and basically pushing against what they call the three characteristics. Push against *aniccam*: See how constant you can make your mind. Push against *dukkham*: See what sense of pleasure you can create out of your sense of the body, out of your present awareness. Push against *anatta*: How much can you control the mind to stay with the object of your concentration? Push against the envelope. You find that you can create a sense of greater constancy than you have in any other way, a greater pleasure than you've experienced for many other things, greater control over your mind.

This is not only to give the mind a pleasant dwelling place, but also to develop more mindfulness and more discernment. It's easier to be mindful when your sense of the breath in the body feels really good. It's easier to stay with it for long periods of time. So you want to take advantage of that. It's easier to see things clearly when everything in the mind is very still. Like the water in a lake: If the water is still, you can see clearly what's in the bottom of the lake. If it's stirred up by the wind, if there's too much movement on the surface, if there's a strong current in the lake that gets it muddied, then even though there may be the same stones and everything else that's under the water when it's clear, you can't see them through the water. But if you allow the mind to settle down and be still, things become a lot clearer. You can see the subtle movements of the mind: where its movements cause stress, where they don't cause stress, or at least where they reduce the amount of stress you've been experiencing.

So in this practice, we're pushing against those characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, all for a good purpose. It allows us to gain the wisdom that ultimately goes beyond them. As I was saying last night, you do develop a healthy sense of self as you pursue the practice. You do get a greater sense of control—but you have to make sure it stays healthy. Avoid the unhealthy senses of self that can develop around the practice. As the Buddha says, don't go comparing yourself, saying, "My practice is better than other people's practice." Or, "I'm a better person than they are because my practice is better than theirs." That's not helpful at all. What is helpful is that you begin to gain a healthier sense of wellbeing, a greater insight into what's going on in the mind, by pushing it in the direction of concentration.

Ultimately you find that things push back. The mind can be made only so constant through concentration. After all, the element of intention that keeps it going is something you have to keep fabricating again and again and again. And even though it's relatively useful, there's still an element of stress simply in that fact.

That's when you run up against the limits of how far you can control these things. But if you hadn't been trying to exert that control, you wouldn't see exactly where the line between controllable and uncontrollable lies. And you wouldn't see the subtleties of the stress that very refined control contains.

This is one way you can induce a sense of dispassion, disenchantment: that no matter how good it gets—and this *is* as good as it gets, in terms of fabricating a sense of wellbeing—it's still not totally sure. It's still not totally solid or constant. Now, some people might give up at this point and say, "If this is as good as it gets, I have to satisfy myself here." But the Buddha was not that kind of person. He had tried to see if there is some way to touch the unconditioned, and he found that there was, by developing these things as far as they can go and then letting them go. Think of the old image of climbing up the top of the pole and letting go. You find that you don't fall, because you've let go not only of the pole, but also of gravity. You've let go of time and space.

That's something you can't control, but it doesn't matter at that point because it doesn't need to be controlled. It doesn't need to be fashioned. You don't have to keep working at it. It has nothing to do with parts of the brain being stimulated or not being stimulated. It lies outside of that dimension. And although you might say there's a oneness, it's a different kind of oneness. It's not based on perception; it's based on total unlimitedness.

So as you work at the practice here, try to be very clear about where your sense of control is. That's where your sense of self is to going to be found, to the extent that you're creating a self. If it's a self based around the skills you develop in the practice, it's actually useful. It's not sentimental. It's not based on some abstract idea. It's based on your skill level, so you want to expand your skills so they can lead you to greater happiness and finally to the point where you don't need those skills anymore. That's when the whole issue of control gets set aside. The whole issue of self and not-self gets set aside. But you get there by exploring exactly how much control you can gain over the aggregates, how much control you can gain over your actions, and by pushing them in as skillful a direction as you can.