

Holding on Strategically

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There are a lot of passages in Ajaan Maha Boowa's teachings where he talks about learning how to see the distinction between yourself and a pain—say it's in the body—and he identifies your self with the mind for that purpose. And there are people who will jump on that and accuse him of saying that there is a self. They miss the point that he's speaking strategically.

You need to have a clear sense of self—and the boundaries of your self—if you're going to see anything at all in the practice, because you need to learn how to divide yourself or separate yourself out of things that you claimed as yourself or just assumed were yourself. And you have to do that in stages. You can't just drop self altogether. Ajaan Lee makes a similar point about people who, at the drop of a hat, just go straight to the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self, and don't take care of their minds.

There are two reasons why you need to have a strategic sense of self. One is that your body and mind are things you're going to have to use, and you have to look after them. You have to care for them. So when you're working with the breath, say, you have a strong sense that you are inhabiting your body, and this is your space. You get to use the breath as medicine for what may come up in the body: times when you're hungry, times when you're tired, times when you're feeling flustered about things around you.

In order to let go, you also need a good solid place to stand. This is what the sense of inhabiting the body provides you with. In fact, ideally, as you're getting into concentration, you want to have a sense that the body, the mind, and the breath are all one. The breath fills the body; the mind fills the body; the mind is one with the breath. They're all sitting here together.

Then you can use this sense of you inhabiting your space when you're dealing with other people. It helps you see when your mind goes out to catch their words or to allow their words to come in. When someone's speaking to you and the energy is strong, you want to have to have a strong sense that they can't penetrate your space. The words simply go around it and are gone. You know what they're saying—in fact, when you're not so concerned with your reaction to what they're saying, you can hear more clearly what's behind the words and deal with the situation a lot more effectively.

But to do that, you need to have a strong sense that you are here in your space, filling your space with good energy. So you're both strengthening your tools—the

things you're going to use for the practice—and providing yourself with a good, strong place to take your stance. And you've got a clear dividing line. Any thoughts that go out to pick up what that person is saying or to take it into your inside space, you can see that they've crossed that line. So you want to keep that line clear. Now as you're sitting here meditating, you're not dealing with other energies outside, but you want to have a good, strong sense that you can stay here and fill this space consistently.

It's a strange quality of this kind of concentration, as you get everything together here like this, that when the time comes for them to divide out as separate things, they divide along their natural fault lines. We may have some preconceived notions about which part is the mind and which part is the body—or, if there's a pain, which part is the pain. But all too often, we cut things across the wrong lines. It's only when they're allowed to stay together like this that then, with the effort of the practice of continual alertness and ardency, they begin to separate out on their own.

This is when you start using Ajaan Maha Boowa's approach of thinking of your mind as you, the body as something else, and the pain as something else again. Here they are. They're all sitting together in the same space, but how are they different? They're different in quality. It's like radio waves in the air. There are the stations from Tijuana, stations from San Diego, stations from Los Angeles all going through the air, all going through your body right now on different frequencies. If you had a radio here, all you'd do is turn the dial a bit, and you could pick the different stations and separate them out from the others so that you could hear each one clearly.

Well, it's the same with the pain, the same with the body, and the same with the mind. They're here in the same space, but they're different qualities. The mind is the knowing quality. The body doesn't know anything; it's just earth, water, wind, and fire. The pain is something else. It's not earth; it's not water; it's not wind; it's not fire. It's a feeling tone. And when you don't glom it together with the body, you begin to see that that feeling tone moves around a lot. In particular, it moves around in connection with your perceptions, the labels you're putting on things: the label that says "pain" or the label that says, "The pain is here."

You begin to realize there are certain acts of the mind that bridge the gap between your knowing element and the physical elements: the acts that say the pain is right there and your awareness is centered right here. You might ask yourself if your awareness is above the pain or is it below the pain? One way to catch yourself, to understand what perceptions you're using, is to start asking questions like this because all too often, we're so used to particular ways of

perceiving things that they become unquestioned. We think that's just the way they are. But if you ask a few questions, you begin to realize that, around the pain, you have a certain number of unexamined assumptions—which is another way that the ajaans translate *saññā* or perception. They're *khwaam samkhan*, assumptions.

You have certain off-the-wall assumptions about where you are in relationship to the pain, or how solid the pain is, or where the pain is. If, by using off-the-wall questions, you can catch those assumptions, those perceptions in the act. You see that they are actions and you can drop them, i.e., you stop doing them. Then you have a very strong sense of the pain as one thing and your awareness as something else. The body is something else again. And then, on a deeper stage, you start applying the same approach to other mental acts—the mental acts that identify what this mind is. When you can separate those out, that's when really interesting things happen inside the mind.

So your sense of self gets shrunken in, shrunken in. You divide the line between self and not-self in different places, closer and closer inside, until you've got it cornered. At that point, you realize that the tools you've been using to do this are the things you've been identifying with—the discernment, the concentration. When can you see those as something separate, that's when you can let go. And things get even more interesting.

Notice that in each case, it's a matter of drawing a line, seeing something that you used to glom together really as two separate things—and moving in, moving in, moving in. The Buddha has a passage where he says if you really want to let go, you have to see things as something separate: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. See your ideas as something separate from your awareness. See your consciousness of your consciousness as something separate, something you want to let go, an activity you want to stop doing.

So when you're working on the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, you learn how to apply them strategically. You don't just drop everything all at once. In Ajaan Lee's terms, that would mean letting go like a pauper. You'd let go and you'd have nothing. To let go like a rich person, you take care of what you've got, the things that are really valuable, and let go of the things that are not valuable. As for the things that are valuable, if you find that some of them lose their value after a while, you let go of them, too—bit by bit by bit—until the work is all done. Then you can let go of everything. But in the meantime, you want to take care of your tools.

A couple of years back, I was talking with a woman who'd been studying with an ajaan who was critical of Ajaan Lee's technique of dealing with the breath. He

said, “Why work with the breath? Why try to fix the breath? It’s just a *sankhara*, something you should let go.” I told her to tell him, “Well, why are you bathing your body? It’s just a *sankhara*.” Of course, you bathe the body because you need to use it. You need to deal with people, you don’t want to offend them—and you don’t want to offend yourself. So you take good care of it, keep it clean. It’s the same with the breath. There will come a point where you let go of the breath, but in the meantime, take good care of it. Use it. Fill the body with good energy so that when you’re dealing with difficult people, you’ve got your own energy shield here to protect yourself. Take care of your perceptions, the perceptions that keep you with the breath because, as you get more sensitive to the process of how your labels affect things, you can use that discernment to cut through all kinds of problems.

So when you let go, let go strategically. When you hang on, hang on strategically. You know Ajaan Chah’s image. You’ve bought a banana. You’re taking it back from the market. Someone asks you, “What are you going to do with the banana?” You say, “I’m going to eat it.” They ask, “Are you going to eat the peel, too?” “Well, no.” “Then why are you carrying the banana peel, too?” He asks, “How you’re going to answer them? You answer through desire.” You want to give a good answer, which is how you come up with one.

He’s illustrating the fact that desire itself has a role to play in the practice. So don’t go round just saying, “I have no preferences. I have no desires.” That doesn’t get you anywhere at all. Take the banana peel because if you don’t have the banana peel, the banana turns to mush in your hand. When the time comes to eat, that’s when you take the peel off and throw it away. Hang onto the things you need to hang onto. Take good care of them. Let go of them only when they serve no more purpose.

This way, you learn to think strategically, and that’s how you’re going to use the Buddha’s teachings properly—as strategies. Then, when they’ve done their work, you can let everything go.