

## *Own Your Actions*

*February 15, 2016*

Ajaan Suwat used to like to comment on how there's a paradox in the Buddha's teachings. On the one hand there's the teaching on not-self: the aggregates are not self, your senses are not self. On other hand there's that phrase in the chant we had just now: "I'm the owner of my actions."

He said that this is an important distinction. If you're going to identify with anything, identify with your actions.

There comes a point, of course, at the end of the path, where you don't identify with anything at all. But to get to that point, you have to be very selective in what you do and don't identify with.

So think about the aggregates as things that are happening to you, the results of past actions. Don't latch on to those. But focus very carefully on what you are doing right now. Because that's where you get to see things in action, to see your mind in action and understand what it's doing that's leading to happiness, what it's doing that's leading to pain. And you can do something about it.

If you applied not-self, not-self, not-self to everything, then there'd really be nothing you could do. I've actually heard of people saying, "Well, you come to realize that no one has any free will, everything is conditioned, so you're just sitting here watching what's going on." That's denying any kind of agency, any kind of responsibility. And that kind of attitude is not going to get you anywhere on the path. It short-circuits the practice.

This is why the ajaans in general warn against going to not-self too quickly or without any discernment. And Ajaan Suwat's distinction is one of the important distinctions to make: What are you doing right now as opposed to what's coming in at you? Because the suffering you're feeling right now, whatever stress or strain or sense of burden or disturbance in the mind: It comes from what you're doing. The things that are coming in may be the raw material for creating that suffering, but you don't have to create suffering out of them.

Now, some people don't like to hear this. It makes them think that they're being blamed for their sufferings. But it's not so much a question of blame, it's just noticing where the cause is and how you can do something about it. And it actually puts you in charge. You accept responsibility so that you can do something about it. This empowers you.

This kind of sense of self is an important one to nurture. It helps keep you focused on the issue of action. Because that's what the Buddha's teachings are all

about. The word *dhamma* can also mean action. It's not a common usage of the word, but it's there in the language. And for the Buddha, it's always in the back of the mind.

When he gave his list of important teachings, the Wings to Awakening, almost all of them are actions of one kind or another. Attitudes. It wasn't a matter of believing in the Buddhist cosmology—that wasn't one of the essential teachings. The essential teachings were qualities of mind that you can develop. And you develop them through your actions. Things like the five strengths, the four bases of success, the establishing of mindfulness: These are all activities. The noble eightfold path is a path of action.

So focus on what you're doing. And it's in the process of understanding what you're doing that you'll see how the Buddha's teachings actually apply to help you do things more skillfully.

You can apply this distinction on all kinds of levels. Two of the questions that came up today: One of them had to do with pain. The fact that there's pain in the body or the pain that comes from physical conditions: That's part of the world. It comes with our engagement with past actions. But the weight that that pain has on your mind right now comes from what you're doing right now.

If you just simply latch on to the pain, that latching on is going to aggravate the sense of suffering in the mind. But if you focus instead on what you're doing, you can say, "I can do that differently. I don't have to latch on."

This is why it's important to listen to the Dhamma: to get ideas about possibilities, about the different techniques or approaches you can take toward the pain. It also gives you some idea of how you might use your ingenuity to come up with new approaches of your own.

After all, everybody's pains are very idiosyncratic. The general outlines are the same. The fact that pain in the body aggravates the mind: That's because of your craving and clinging. But the precise way in which you visualize that pain to yourself and conceive of your relationship to the pain and the way you suck it in as you feed on the pain: Those things are going to be very idiosyncratic. So you might have to ask some idiosyncratic questions about it. But as long as you're very actively questioning, you become a moving target, and the pain can't shoot you.

After a while you begin to realize that the pain's not trying to shoot you. It's because you've been running up after it and gobbling it down. But if you stop gobbling it and instead approach it from other angles without the desire to make it go away, you can live with it. The physical pain may have to stay there, although you can check if that's the case by working with the breath energy first to see if that can help.

If you have this good solid foundation in your concentration inside, this center inside, then you can make forays out from that center and probe into the pain. Ask questions about it. And as long as you're asking questions you're not sitting there feeding on it. That changes your relationship.

And that's precisely the kind of thing the Buddha's talking about. You want to focus on what you're doing. Because that's going to make all the difference.

This is why he put aside all those abstract questions about being, like: "What is the nature of the cosmos?" or, "What are you as a person?" "Is the cosmos eternal, is it not eternal?" "Is it finite or is it infinite?" He said that those things don't really matter. And if you define yourself as anything, you place limitations on yourself.

Instead, look at what you're doing and learn how to do it more skillfully. Even with our idea of self, he says to look at it as a kind of action. You *do* the act of identifying. And in identifying, you're going to place some limitations on yourself. Now, there *are* some identities that are useful to take on as part of the path on a temporary basis. But when you begin to see that your sense of who you are is making you suffer, you can say, "I can question this. I don't have to identify with these things. I can identify with other activities, other things that I'm doing."

That's how you grow. This is how your sense of self will change—or how you add new senses of self to your stable and put some of the old senses of self out to pasture. They don't need to do any work for you anymore. They're no longer helpful.

So keep looking at things in terms of action.

The other question that came up this evening was about rebirth, about what gets reborn. That was another one of those questions the Buddha never answered. And it was the question that was being asked a lot in those days. You try to first define what you are and then say, "Given what I am, can this thing be reborn?" People would identify with their bodies; they'd identify with different aspects of the mind. And the question was always back and forth: "Is this what you really are? If so, can this survive the death of the body?"

This kind of questioning exists up until today. I know people who claim that, given what we know our biological makeup, a human being is just the body, and consciousness is a result of physical and chemical interactions in the body. But actually, they don't know that. It's just an assumption. But once you make that assumption, then the question is, "Can such a thing be reborn?" And they would answer, "No, it's impossible. Once the body's done, that's it."

But that wasn't the Buddha's approach. His approach was to say, "What can the mind do in terms of finding true happiness?" And in the course of finding that

true happiness, he learned a lot about the nature of how consciousness acts and what keeps it going. It's a feeding process, and he discovered it doesn't have to depend on the body. Consciousness can depend simply on craving.

It's like a fire going from one building to another. You don't need to have a piece of wood touching this burning building in order for the fire to go across the wood to the other side. The fire can subsist on the oxygen in the air as it leaps from one building to the next.

He says that, in the same way, the consciousness doesn't need the body. It can feed on clinging and craving.

But what is this consciousness? He says to look at it as a process. These things that you're doing, the activity of craving and clinging: See them just as things you're doing.

This becomes a really useful approach. Instead of wasting your time defining what you are and then trying to draw conclusions from that, he said, "This is what a human being does. This is what the mind does. And this is what it can do." It can create or it can develop a level of skill that goes way beyond what you might imagine if you just sat around thinking and talking. And it can have a huge impact on the extent to which you're going to keep on suffering or not.

Now that's a really useful question, a really useful series of questions to pursue.

This is one of the reasons that I personally don't like to get involved in interreligious dialogues because other religions are asking other questions. I think the Buddha's questions are the ones that are really worth focusing on. And they really do cut away a lot of the suffering we cause for ourselves.

Otherwise, we're like the person who goes to a doctor. He's hitting himself over the head with a hammer and says, "Doctor, I've got a headache. Can you cure this for me?" And the doctor says, "Well, stop hitting yourself over the head with a hammer." And the guy just doesn't realize he's doing that. Some people say, "No, I want another explanation for why I've got a headache." Well, as long as you keep hitting yourself over the head with a hammer, it's not going to stop, no matter what the doctor gives you.

So turn around and look at what you're doing. As you create suffering around various issues, as you create suffering around physical pain, about other concerns in your life, what are you doing that creates the suffering? Try to get more conscious of that.

This is why we practice concentration: to get the mind still enough with an all-around sense of awareness so that you can begin to see the things that you've been hiding from yourself—that you've been doing all along—either deliberately hiding them or just not knowing at all.

But when you can bring these things to light and realize that you don't have to keep on doing them, that there's an alternative: That approach can open up a lot of really useful possibilities.