

One Person

August 29, 2020

I learned the other day of a Dhamma teacher claiming that nobody's going to get awakened until everybody gets awakened. Of course, that immediately calls into question: What about the Buddha? Was he not awakened?

The fact that he was awakened and couldn't take anybody else with him into awakening—he could teach other people the way, but they had to do it for themselves—the fact that he couldn't take other people illustrates a principle that Ajaan Suwat liked to repeat many times, which is that each of us has only one person. All the people in the world have only one person: We each have ourselves. We're the only people we can really be responsible for.

Our problem is that we tend not to be responsible for ourselves. We see the wrong things that other people are doing and want to straighten them out without stopping to think, well, maybe we should straighten ourselves out first. And our desire to straighten other people out, or even our desire to be compassionate, to sacrifice ourselves for others: What does that come from?

Usually there's an inability to really turn around and look at ourselves, to be truthful to ourselves about ourselves, about our actions. You ask people, "Why did you do that particular action?" Oftentimes they have to stop and think for a bit, which means they weren't really clear about the intention when they did the action in the first place. Yet this is precisely what we have to be responsible for.

This is another issue that Ajaan Suwat liked to talk about. The Buddha talks about how the five aggregates are not-self, the six sense-media are not-self, yet when it comes to karma: We are the owners of our actions. He said, "Contemplate that for a while." In many ways, the aggregates are the results of our actions, the results of choices we've made, but we have to be responsible for the choices. Once the choice has been made and set into motion, then it's beyond our control. That's the point where you have to let it go. You have to focus on where you still *are* in control, the choices you're making right now, and try to make them as skillful as possible.

This is why we come to meditate, because we focus on the mind, we focus on our intentions. The Thai translation for *samadhi* means a firm intention: You make up your mind to stay with the breath, or whatever your topic is going to be, and then you don't unmake your mind. You don't let it slip, you don't let it slide, you hold to that intention each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. That's the task here, so that you can become consistently responsible for your choices.

One of the disconcerting things about the practice, especially when you're first getting started, is how inconsistent your choices are. You make up your mind you're going to stay here,

and a few breaths later you're someplace else. I was talking today with someone saying that she made up her mind that as she went through the day, she was going to stay with the breath. And then sometimes she'd find that she was away from it for a whole hour before she realized what had happened. That's an extreme example, but it shows what the mind can do. It can hoodwink itself.

Or in Ajaan Chah's image, you're sitting there and all of a sudden someone comes up and takes a burlap bag and puts it over your head, ties it up, carries you off, and takes the bag off, and you find yourself someplace else entirely. You have no idea how you got there. That's how the mind works. You could be thinking suddenly of Siberia or Australia, the South Pole, Ethiopia. Recipes for tomorrow's meal. All kinds of random bits and pieces, like a packrat's nest: lots of random stuff in there. The mind can go very fast and switch directions very quickly.

That's precisely what we've got to learn how to overcome, because if your mind is out of control now, just think of what it's going to be like when you're dying. Doctors are probing you, nurses are doing this and that. Or maybe you're not in a hospital. Maybe you're off at the scene of an accident someplace. There are all kinds of ways that we can die. The body gets so bad that you can't stay there anymore, and yet you're just supposed to be cool and collected so that you can make the right choice at that time. That means you've got to be cool and collected *now*. Make a choice and stick with it.

Choose the breath, make the breath interesting so that it's more and more absorbing, so that the mind is willing to settle in, settle down. And then guard it. Keep remembering that this is where you want to be. That's the function of mindfulness: remembering. Mindfulness and concentration go right together. Without the mindfulness, there can be no concentration, because when you make up your mind to stay with the breath, you have to keep remembering each time you breathe in that that's what you've made up your mind to do.

Then try to make being here as pleasant as possible, so that it's interesting, enjoyable. Try to find some really sensitive spot inside. For a lot of people, it's right in the middle of the chest or down at the tip of the sternum. Someplace in that central corridor of the body, you may call it, there's a really sensitive spot. Try to breathe in a way that feels really good there. You can think of the breath energy coming in from the front; you can think of it coming in from behind, from the left, from the right. See what feels best. Then try to maintain that sense of feeling *really* good. If the breath gets too long, it'll drain you. If it's too short, you can't develop a sense of satisfaction, of just rightness. So look very carefully there.

You're using your ingenuity to stick with that original intention. And there will be a sense of *you* doing this, especially as you're wrestling the mind to get it to settle down. As it begins to settle down more and more easily, more and more consistently, then the sense of self involved in this gets more and more attenuated, goes more into the background. Still, it'll be there. In fact, it's one of the last things you're going to ferret out.

This evening I received a message from someone saying, “How can my choices be not-self? Who’s making the choices?” The answer is, for the time being, be okay with the fact that it’s *you* making the choices. It’s only when you get to the subtler stages, after you’ve mastered concentration, mastered the precepts, that you can really turn around and look at that voice that’s making the choices: “Look here. Go there. What next? What next?” And you can let go of that, because at that point you don’t need it. Your sense of self *is* a strategy, just as your sense of not-self is a strategy. A lot of the skill in the practice is knowing when to use which: when not-self is skillful and when self is skillful—and what kinds of not-self can be unskillful, as well as which kinds of self can be skillful.

But for the time being, let those questions settle back in the background. You want to maintain this sense of stillness right here. Because the stillness is going to be necessary to see these things clearly—these subtle movements of the mind.

So try to be responsible for this one person sitting here right now. The more you take responsibility right here, the better the results are going to be. And you’ll find that focusing on this one person is not a selfish thing—although that was another issue that Ajaan Suwat liked to talk about. The phrase they have in Thailand for “don’t be selfish,” literally means “don’t look after yourself.” He said that’s wrong. You *do* have to look after yourself. But look after yourself in a skillful way and it becomes not-selfish. It becomes wise.

Because if you really care about your interest, your well-being, you can’t harm the well-being of others. So look after your well-being in a skillful way, in a wise way, and there’s nothing selfish about it at all. It’s not only your contribution to yourself, but it’s also your contribution to the world. It’s for well-being all-around.