

Not-self in Context

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One of our problems as Westerners coming to Buddhism is that we tend to want to jump to the high-level teachings right away, before we're ready for them. Ajaan Lee for instance, warns against jumping to the issues of inconstancy, stress and not-self before you're ready for them.

As he said, the Buddha started out by taking what was inconstant in his mind and turning it into something constant—in other words, creating a state of concentration. He took what was stressful and turning it into ease. He took what was not-self and bringing it under his control.

It's only when you've done that, that you're ready to take on the teachings of inconstancy, stress, and not-self on a subtle level where they really do make a difference in the mind, really do give rise to dispassion.

But first you have to be passionate about training the mind. The dispassion in the beginning has to deal with things that you find are going to pull you away from your concentration.

So if you're going to use the contemplation of inconstancy, stress, and not-self now, apply it to what's pulling you away. Thoughts about yesterday, thoughts about tomorrow, thoughts about food, clothing, shelter and medicine, thoughts about people: Those are things you want to be dispassionate for. But you want to be passionate for the object of your meditation.

So focus on the breath. Learn how to be passionate for the breath. If the level of ease in the breath is not very constant, try to make it more constant. See how you can bring this under control so that the mind is willing to settle down with it. Bringing the breath more under control, you bring the mind more under control as well.

In other words, the first order of business is to learn the skill of meditation. And then the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self come in as part of that skill. You see the same pattern in the Buddha's teachings to the five brethren. The discourse on not-self was the second

discourse — it wasn't the first. In that discourse, the Buddha gives two arguments for why the aggregates should be seen as not-self. One is that you can't really control them: You can't tell them not to grow old, you can't tell them not to get sick, you can't tell them not to die. The second argument is, if these things are inconstant and stressful, is it worthwhile calling them self? In other words, this is a value judgment.

He's not asking the five brethren to come to the conclusion that there is no self. He's just asking that, when you see that your body is inconstant, or your thoughts are inconstant — in other words, they're not all that reliable — are they easeful? Well, no, they're not easeful. If things are not really easeful and inconstant, are they worth calling yourself? Again, no. That's the second argument and that was the argument that led them to awakening.

But before bringing up the topic of not-self, he started the first sermon, *Setting the Wheel in Motion*, with the discussion of action. What's the path of practice that's noble? There are two ignoble paths — there's the path of indulging in sensual desires and there's the path of self-mortification — neither of which is noble. Then the Buddha says, there is this middle way that is noble and does lead to awakening.

So the Buddha set the five brethren onto the noble path before saying anything about not-self at all. First, he got them to develop their actions. As we know from other suttas, the eightfold path is a path of action that leads to the end of action—in other words, to a state of mind that's not created. But you've got to do the action to get there.

So the context here is action and trying to find a skillful action that leads to good results. And action, of course, implies a certain amount of control. You do want to have some control over your views, your resolves, and all the way to your concentration. So you work on that first. It's important to keep this sense of the right context in mind.

Because all too often you hear people starting with the idea that the Buddha taught there is no self and then the question comes, "Well he's teaching karma and rebirth, so if there's no self, who does the karma, who receives the results of the karma? What gets reborn?" And there's a conflict. But you reverse the context: The Buddha started

with action, teaching a path of action. And then, after having established that, having gotten people on that path, then he raised the issue of self. What kind of action is self?

In the case of the five brethren, they were all already stream-enterers before he raised the issue of not-self. In other cases, we know that he taught people that there are times when you want to hold on to a sense of self. You sense a *you* here meditating so make sure that the *you* here is doing it well. Other people can do this, so can you. Having that attitude: It counts as conceit, but it's a useful kind of conceit — it's necessary for succeeding at the path.

And there's a question: "Do you really love yourself?" You came here to do this practice. When you feel tempted to stop, ask yourself, "Okay, you came here for this purpose, which is to put an end to suffering. Do you not want to do that? Don't you really care for your genuine happiness?" It's in cases like that where the activity of identifying yourself is actually useful.

So, taking action as the context, you begin to see self and not-self as activities. And then the question is, when is it skillful to have a particular sense of self and when is it not? When is it more skillful to apply the perception of not-self? And this is it: When you're starting out here, the affairs of the world are at this moment not your business and none of your affair. They're not your friends right now. So put them aside, put them aside. Try to get on friendly terms with the breath. Have some sense of control.

Telling yourself to stay with the breath is an area where this particular sense of self is a skillful activity. There are times when not-self is also a skillful activity. So you learn how to use these perceptions when they're appropriate. Ultimately, when you let go of everything, you let go of even the perceptions of self and not-self. But in the meantime, as long as you're on the path you learn how to use them well.

So remember the path comes first, and passion for the path comes first. Don't let yourself short-circuit everything by trying to go for dispassion right away. The things you hold onto: Ajaan Maha Boowa's image is of a ladder — you're climbing a ladder up to the roof of a house. You

don't just let go. You hold onto one rung and then you grasp the rung that's higher than that, and then you let go of that lower rung, and use that hand to grasp onto the higher rung. And you keep going up, up, up, this way. You don't let go of the ladder until you're up on the roof.

And it's the same with our practice. You want to develop a healthy sense of self — you can't avoid that. Many people want to bypass this issue of straightening out their sense of self by going straight for no-self or not-self. But it doesn't work. You have to go through the process of seeing what kind of selfing is skillful and what kind of selfing is not—and when it's skillful, when it's not. What kind of not-selfing is skillful and what kind of not-selfing is not? When is it skillful, when is it not?

You realize you that have choices for applying these perceptions and you want to do it well. As you get more sensitive to these choices, you get more and more appreciation for the freedom you have to choose. Then you begin to realize there are other choices that you wouldn't have imagined if you hadn't cleared these things up first.

So right now your choice is, "Where are you going to focus?" Okay, focus on the breath. "What are you going to do with the breath?" Try to make it comfortable. "Once it's comfortable what are you going to do?" Well, see if you can maximize that comfort, make it steady, and then allow it to spread so that the whole body feels good as you breathe in, breathe out. These are your choices right now.

As you pursue the right choice, that opens up other alternatives, new possibilities for choice. And among them will be when you get a sense of what kind of self you're creating as you meditate: When is it useful, when is it not? You have choices here too. It's by making the right choices that better and better choices become available.

So follow this issue of trying to be skillful in your actions as passionately as you can. Start with the path. And as for issues of self and not-self, learn to use them as you're mastering the skills of the path. Putting things in the right context can make all the difference in the world.