

## *The Battle of Your Selves*

*August 8, 2018*

We sit here trying to get the mind into concentration, to get it focused on the breath, and all of a sudden we find it someplace else. By that I mean without any sense that we intended to go someplace else, it's just that we're there. This is a good lesson in how your self is pretty arbitrary, and how there are many selves in there. The self that wants to meditate is one self; the self that wants to think about the distraction, that's another one. And you don't learn about those different selves by just allowing the mind to wander around. You have to put up a fight. As soon as you realized you've slipped off the breath, you've got to come back and be prepared for the next time. And try to see: what are the signs that the mind is about ready to leave, where its interest in the breath begins to flag and something else comes in, and it jumps.

Sometimes the decision is made before you go. It's just waiting for the right opportunity for a lapse in mindfulness. If you slip off again, try to come to your senses quickly and come back. It's in the coming back that you're strengthening your mindfulness, you're strengthening your alertness, you're strengthening your ardency: that you really do want to do this. And the more you fight off distraction, the more you see how splintered your self is into many different selves. And that's an important lesson.

We often come to practice thinking that our sense of self is something that is monolithic: "There's me, one big hunk of me, or lump of me." It's only when you put up a fight like this that you begin to realize that there are many yous in there, with different agendas, different ideas about what would be a good way to spend your time right now. And you begin to see how arbitrary it is that you would identify with any of them. But you are making a choice. Your sense of self is something you create. It's not a given.

I remember reading a question: What is this self that Buddhism says we're not? It was one of those magazine lineups with lots of different teachers and it got lots of different answers, and the important part of the lineup was that all the

answers were right. It comes down to the fact that whatever you identify as your self, the Buddha says No. It's not as if he has one definition of self and arbitrarily imposes that on you. You're the one who's defining your self in different ways, and when you can see that it is an active definition, then you can begin to look at it as an activity. What are these activities that make your self?

That's where the Buddha uses his teachings on the aggregates. Sometimes the aggregates are presented as the Buddha's answer to the question of what you are. Actually it's the answer to the question: What do you *think* you are? What you think you is made up out of these aggregates. You don't see them in action until you try to get the mind into concentration.

This is another one of the reasons why concentration is such an important part of gaining insight: not simply that it gets the mind quiet enough to see what's going on in the mind, but also—in the process of getting the mind to settle down, struggling with your different selves, and then finally getting the mind to put together a state of concentration where you can begin to stay more and more consistently—you're getting some hands-on experience with those five aggregates.

You've got the form sitting here, the form of your body as you feel it from within. The breath, in particular, as you feel it as it goes through the body. That's form, the first aggregate.

The second aggregate is feeling. There may be feelings of irritation here, pain there, pleasure here, there. You want to focus on the pleasure. And in focusing on the pleasure together with the breath, you begin to realize how important your perceptions are, the ways you label things. That's the third aggregate. How you picture the breath to yourself is going to have an impact on the kind of feelings you get out of the breath.

So what picture of the breath do you have right now? There are some useful ones to replace the idea of the breath coming in and out only through the nose. You can think of the body filled with all the pores of the skin breathing at the same time, like a sponge, and everything connects inside. Or you can think of the breath as originating inside, not coming from outside. It is, after all, the energy coming from inside. Ask yourself: Where does that start? Or where are the many places where it starts? Are they working in unison? Or is there any conflict among

them? In this way, you begin to see what your perceptions are, and how they have an impact on your experience of the body, the form, and your experience of feeling.

And then there's all the conversation inside that's doing this analysis as to which perceptions work, which ways of breathing work: That's fabrication, the fourth aggregate. And then there's just the basic awareness of all of these things: That's consciousness, the fifth.

These are the basic component factors of your meditation. And you get to know them well as you're putting your concentration together, and also as you begin to notice how the mind slips off from concentration, because it's also the aggregates that slip you off and try to put you in another world. Sometimes you get to know the aggregates really well as you're staying here with them, and other times you get familiar with them, or you begin to catch some insight into them, as they're trying to create another world while you're trying to put a stop to that.

Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Maha Boowa talk about the ways in which distractions get started in the mind, and it's interesting that they switch roles in terms of the perception and the fabrication. Ajaan Maha Boowa would start with the fabrication, a stirring of energy in the mind, and then he says you slap a perception on top of that. In Ajaan Lee's analysis, it's the perception that comes first. There's an image and then you decide to run with it or not. That decision is the fabrication. And both ways of the understanding the process are right.

The thing is that, in the course of fighting this process, this is how you learn what those aggregates are. Because when you first read the Buddha's analysis of suffering, the five clinging-aggregates, first he starts talking about the suffering of birth, aging, illness and death, being separated from what you love, having to be with things you don't like, not getting what you want. It all sounds very familiar. And he says the five clinging-aggregates are what lie at the essence of the suffering in each of those cases, and that doesn't sound familiar at all. But as you're working with the mind, trying to struggle with it to get it to settle down, you begin to realize that both the concentration you want and the distractions you don't want are made out of aggregates. You begin to see how the mind latches onto these things. Where's the point where it decides: "Yes, I want to go with this set of

aggregates rather than that one.” That’s the clinging, and you look into that a little deeper and you say, “Well, why would I want to cling?”

What does clinging mean? It means to feed. As the Buddha said, once you become a being you have to feed. This is why some of our sense of ourselves as beings center on feeding. And it’s seeing all these different selves, all these different beings that we identify with, seeing them struggle: That’s what gives you a chance to get out of them. If you were just one you in here, there would be no place where you could stand to get a perspective on these things. But fortunately there are lots of yous in here. And so you use one sense of you to get an insight into other senses of you; to step back from them, to see them as strange. Not only strange, but also burdensome, arbitrary. Why would you want to go with them?

Once you can think that, that’s when you begin to pry yourself loose. Then, when you get latching on to something else, you can say, “I don’t want to feed that way, there are other ways to feed.”

And the big strategy of the practice is to get you attached to one really good way of feeding, i.e., the concentration, so that as the mind slips out after other things, you see it in action, you see it running out. You say, “Nope, I don’t want to go there. I know that there’s stress, there’s suffering.” This teaches you to dis-identify more and more with these different selves that you’ve been nurturing and petting and feeding all along—until there’s only one self left standing, and that’s the self that’s in concentration.

And when you can step back from that, and say, “Well, this too is stressful”: That’s how you incline the mind, as the Buddha said, to the deathless, something that doesn’t change—something that doesn’t involve all this selfing, all this fabricating, and all the stress that goes into fabricating.

It’s like following a vine. We used to have these huge vines spread out through the orchard, and you’d follow them back, follow them back, and finally discover that there was just one root. You’d pull out the root and that would be the end to the whole vine, all the different vines connected to it. It’s the same way with all these different selves. You boil them down to just this one that wants to find some true happiness and is convinced that this is the way. In the course of developing that, you’ve managed to deal with all the other aggregates that would pull you into

other senses of self, seeing their drawbacks and saying No to them. When you've gotten out of all those other selves, then when you pull out of this one, there's no place else you want to go. Not wanting to stay, not wanting to go: That's what opens the door to something that's beyond all this. But to get there, first you've got to make that struggle.

Some people say to just let your mind wander wherever it likes, and be mindful of wherever it's going. Well, the mind can play lots of tricks on itself when you do that. In fact, the whole point of distraction is that the mind is playing a trick on itself. If you don't see that, if you don't see the ways in which the mind's lying to itself, then you don't really see the fault lines in your different selves. You've got to fight the distraction, the tendency to want to go someplace else. You fight it on the one hand by seeing the drawbacks of the distraction, and on the other hand by seeing the value of a mind that can settle down with a sense of nourishment, a sense of true well-being.

As I say, it's when you fight with an enemy that you really get to know the enemy, and you really get to know your own strengths and weaknesses as well. In this case the enemy is nobody else, it's just other selves inside you. Often it's selves you've been nurturing and feeding for a long, long time, and meditation gives you a chance to step away from them.

You're not trapped in the old ways you've used in the past to negotiate with the world or among your stable of selves. You're being given a new set of skills, with more mindfulness, more alertness, more ardency. In the course of mastering these skills, you learn an awful lot about who you think you are, and who you don't want to be any more. And as you create your sense of your self as a meditator, that gives you a better self to be, provisionally, so that as you're letting go of these other selves you don't feel so much regret. Because this self, as you get used to it, is a really good place to be. And as you get a sense of belonging more and more here, that shifts the center of gravity. It brings things down to being one, without all these divided selves. And as Ajaan Lee says, once it's one then it's easy to make it zero.

So put up the good fight making it one, because it's pulling you in a good direction.

There's an interesting passage in the Canon where the Buddha says, "Whatever is not you, let go of it and that will be for your long-term welfare and happiness." Notice that: *for your long term welfare and happiness*. He's not saying there's no you at all. You have to use a sense of you to motivate yourself to let go. It's just that the happiness that you'll find as a result doesn't have a sense of you, and it's not missing a sense of you, because it doesn't need to create it.

Every sense of you is something you create as a strategy to find happiness. That's why we have so many selves to begin with, because we've found happiness so many different ways. But the happiness that comes at the end of the path doesn't require any sense of self to maintain it because it doesn't require any action at all.

So that's where this fight is headed: to a state of real peace. There are so many battles you fight in the world and they're just provisional. They set you up for another battle. But the battle among your selves inside, when you win it, is the end of all wars.