

Squeezing Goodness Out of the Aggregates

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Our sense of self is a strategy for finding happiness in worlds of becoming. It answers two questions: Who's going to be able to put forth the effort to bring that happiness about? And who's going to benefit from it? And depending on how we define ourselves in terms of either of those questions, we decide what's worth doing and how it can be done. As long as we're looking for happiness in a world of becoming, we're going to need a sense of self.

This is why when we hear that the Buddha taught that there is no self, there's a very large part of the mind that resists. And it's good that it does resist, because the Buddha never actually said that and, more importantly, what does it mean to say there's no self? It means there's no agent. There's nobody doing anything and there's nobody receiving the results of those actions. The actions are just there and don't really matter. It makes you want to give up. But the Buddha wasn't the kind of person who gave up. There was that part of him who really wanted happiness; who devoted his life to the search for genuine happiness. And after all, he was dissatisfied with the inconstant things in which he was already looking for happiness. And he said, "Can there be something that doesn't die? Something with no aging, no illness, no death?" That's a very high demand. And he kept to those standards.

So what does the teaching on *anatta*, or not-self, mean? Ajaan Lee has several interesting ways of dealing with it. One, he said that the Buddha didn't just say that everything is inconstant, stressful, not-self, and then give up. He actually tried to see what was constant lying in the midst of what's inconstant, what was easeful lying in the midst of what is stressful, and what you could control in the midst of all these things we can't control. This is how you get the mind into concentration. We try to get the breath so that it's easeful. We try to get the mind so that it can stay constantly with the breath. And that requires a certain amount of control.

Then Ajaan Lee goes on to say then the Buddha let go of both sides: both what was constant and inconstant; easeful and stressful; self and not-self. What you're doing is you're learning how to use these things as tools to find something that goes deeper. You let go of them when you've found what you're looking for, but in the meantime, you don't give up.

I was reading a book by a monk one time who said, "The practice of concentration requires a sense of self. We all know the Buddha discouraged

having a sense of self, so don't make an effort to practice concentration. Let it happen on its own." But then the question would be, what is right concentration doing in the path? There's no way you're going to get the mind concentrated just by allowing it to wander as it likes and somehow coming up with concentration. It's like getting 100 monkeys to type and expecting that one of them would come up with Shakespeare. The odds are hugely against it. You definitely do want to see what you can get under your control.

And use your ingenuity. This is one of the qualities required by the path. The Buddha said you have to have a good sense of yourself: where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are in terms of learning, virtue, generosity, conviction, discernment, and particularly your ingenuity. So you try to develop these things. Try to get a sense of what you've got here in terms of these aggregates, and what you can do with them.

Like the aggregate of form: What can you do with the different elements or the properties of earth, water, wind and fire? Ajaan Lee himself was able to recover from a heart attack out in the middle of the jungle just using his breath. There was no one there to tell him how to do it. He had to use his own ingenuity. So when you find troubles coming up in your meditation, don't just give up. Tell yourself: There must be a way around this. When you believe that there is a way, you're going to find it. If you don't believe there's a way, you're certainly not going to find it. It's not going to suddenly magically appear for you.

As for things that are not-self: The perception of not-self is something you apply to things that get in the way of practicing virtue and concentration. In other words, anything unskillful in your menagerie of selves, you learn to look at it more objectively. Put a question mark around it. And as you get better concentration, you can pull away from those things. Step back from them. Recognize them as old selves that may have had a use a long time ago, but you've now got to put them out to pasture. They don't work anymore. You don't want to claim them as yours anymore.

As for parts of the body that are beyond your control, find out where they are by trying to use your ingenuity and your concentration to see what you *can* get under your control. The body doesn't come with any clear demarcations as to what's under your control and what's not. Of course, with time, more and more things get out of your control. But you're not going to find exactly where the line is until you push it. In fact, that's a lot of what Ajaan Lee's concentration instructions are all about. Push the limits of the line in terms of what you can make constant and easeful and bring under your control. In this way, you're not just importing the Buddha's ideas wholesale into your head. You use them to look

in ways you didn't look before. You're beginning to see that when you run up against a wall, it is a wall. And that's something you can know only for yourself.

But there are enough potentials in the mind that you don't have to be walled in. So use these tools, these aggregates. As the Buddha said, if you cling to them in the wrong way, there's going to be suffering. If you cling to them in the right way, they can actually become part of the path—these activities the mind does in terms of feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. This is how we make the path.

And we look after it. That's another aspect of Ajaan Lee's teachings on not-self. He noted that some people just give up and say, "Well, these aggregates are not-self, so just let them go. Don't do anything with them." He says there are a lot of good things in the aggregates. You don't just throw them away. He makes a comparison with having a wound that's getting infected. If you just say, "Well, that's the nature of wounds," you're going to die if you don't do something about the infection. In the same way, if you just let go of your aggregates, saying, "Well, they're not me. They're not mine," you're letting go like a pauper.

That's another one of his analogies. There are good things you can get out of these aggregates, and only then do you let them go. You don't carry them around. It's like owning a car. You don't take your car to bed with you. You don't carry it around in your knapsack. You leave it outside. You use it when you need to and you put it aside when you don't. But you have to make the effort to be able to buy the car to begin with. The same with the aggregates: You have to make the effort with them to give your mind a place where it can settle down and be at its ease. Then, when you let that place go, it's still there for you to use when you need it. Like the Buddha: Even though he let go of his virtue, concentration, and discernment in the final steps of the path, still they didn't go away. They were there for him to use as he taught others.

So take care of your aggregates. Look after them and they'll be good to you—up to a point. If you can get the path out of them, then you've got what you really need out of them. I had a student once who went over to Thailand and ordained as a nun there. She had been doing the Ajaan Lee method, working with the breath. Her new ajaan, however, didn't like that method. He said, "Why are you trying to adjust the breath? It's just a fabrication." She told me what he said. And I told her that if he had said that to me, I probably would have been driven out of the monastery, because I would have said, "Well, why are you bathing your body? It's just a fabrication." These things are there for us to use. We take good care of them as we can to get the best use out of them.

When the time comes when they can't do anything for us anymore, that's when you totally let them go. And to do that without any sense of regret, you get practice beforehand by getting what's good out of them. Try to squeeze as much goodness as you can out of your body, because goodness really does have value. As for the limitations you run into in terms of the body, you don't really know where they are until you've pushed against them.

I've told you about that old woman who had gone with a friend to stay with Ajaan Maha Boowa for a while. The friend had cancer and wanted to meditate to get herself ready for her death. Ajaan Maha Boowa had said, "I can look after your mind but I can't look after your illness. You need to have a doctor come along." There was an old retired doctor, a woman in her eighties, who had agreed to come along. Ajaan Maha Boowa gave them three months' worth of Dhamma talks, almost every night without exception. And they recorded all of the talks. When they returned home, the friend who had cancer died after a couple months. The old woman doctor still was around. She said, "Suppose I try transcribing the tapes?" There were more than eighty tapes altogether, and she was more than eighty years old. Her eyesight was bad. She had a lot of health problems. But she was able to transcribe all of them. They were printed in two large books.

She said that what kept her going through the project was a comment by Ajaan Maha Boowa that as you're getting older and the body gets weaker, still try to squeeze as much goodness out of the body as you can while you've got it so that when you have to throw it away, you have something good to show for the fact that you had this body to begin with. You had this mind. So you don't give up. The teaching on not-self is not a teaching for lazy people or defeatist people. It's for people who, as the Buddha says, want to get the essence out of having these aggregates.

The aggregates themselves may not have an essence, but if you use them right, they can take you to something that does have essence: release. So don't be too quick to throw them away. Get the best use you can out of them. Get them into concentration. Use your ingenuity to develop more and more discernment as you get the mind to settle down and deal with whatever problems come up.

You'll find that these ephemeral things that are not-self can lead you to true happiness if you use them right. In fact, the happiness is so good that once you finally get it, you don't need to ask who's experiencing it. This was one of Ajaan Suwat's comments. He said that once you've found the ultimate happiness, you don't care to ask if there's a self or not-self experiencing it. The happiness is that sufficient. After all, self and not-self are strategies for finding happiness. Once

true, unchanging happiness is found, why hang on to the strategies? They just get in the way.

In the meantime, though, there's a lot of good to be found in these aggregates by using them well. So don't be too quick to throw them away. Find that goodness while you can.