

## *Skillful Selfing*

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The Buddha's instructions on right mindfulness are basically his directions for getting the mind into right concentration. You stay focused on the body in and of itself—and here, to do that, we're going to take the breath as our object. You put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, anything that's not related to the breath, anything that's related to the world right now, just put it aside. Those are the two activities you do: the staying focused and the putting aside.

Then you bring three qualities to bear on these activities. The first is that you're ardent: You try to do this well. The second is that you're alert: You're watching what you're actually doing and the results you're getting. And then you're mindful: You try to remember what you're doing and you remember to put other things away. These qualities are all about activities: what you're doing, your focus on what you're doing, your ability to remember what you should be doing, and the fact that you're trying to do it well.

So with the breath, this means remembering to be sensitive to how the breathing feels in the body. The Buddha doesn't say that you have to focus on the breath in any particular spot. You can focus anywhere in the body where the sensation of breathing feels good, or at least feels prominent and you can follow it carefully, clearly, knowing that "Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out." As you stay with the breath, you find that the smoother and more continuous your focus on the breath, the smoother and more comfortable the breath becomes.

If you've got a rhythm of breathing that doesn't feel good, you can change. You can try long breathing for a while, to see how that feels; short breathing, see how that feels; heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, shallow. Experiment. This is what alertness is for. You do something and you watch the results. You see the connection between what you're doing and the results you're getting.

Once you find a rhythm that feels good, you stick with it. You can think of that sense of ease spreading through the body. Ajaan Lee has you think of the breath going down the nerves, down the spine, out the legs, out through the tips of the toes. Down the shoulders, down the arms, in the middle of the torso. What we're trying to develop here is whole-body awareness. The sense of ease fills the body, your awareness fills the body, and in Ajaan Lee's phrase, you "use the breath as the solvent to get the ease to spread throughout the body."

Then you try to maintain this. This, too, requires mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Don't let anything else come in to interfere. Try to do this as well as you can. Whatever techniques you've learned to help stay with the breath and keep the breath comfortable, you try to remember them. And then you're alert to what you're doing.

This quality of alertness is important to understand. Sometimes you're told that it means just being aware of whatever is happening in the present moment. But the Buddha's

focus is more specific. You're focused on what you're doing in the present moment, because what you're doing is *the* issue in all the practice. You're already creating suffering through your actions, and the purpose of the practice is to change your actions so that you can stop creating suffering.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha was so insistent on the importance of his teachings on kamma. He wasn't the sort of person who would go out and pick fights with other people, but he would go out and debate with people who taught that kamma didn't give any results, that everything you experience now is totally the result of past actions, which would mean that you had no choices in the present moment. After all, he's teaching a path of action that leads to the end of suffering: changing your actions from actions that cause suffering to actions that put an end to it. So if you want to understand his teachings on different topics, it's always good to look first to see how they relate to his teachings on kamma.

A prime example is his teachings on self and not-self. We tend to think of self as a thing and not-self as the absence of that thing. But he saw your sense of self as an activity. It's one of those activities that can create suffering, but a sense of self can also be trained so that it becomes part of the path to the end of suffering. Your sense of self is something you *do*. As with any action, the question is when is it skillful and when is it not. He recommends that you develop a sense of self that has a sense of responsibility. "The self as its own mainstay," as he says, *Attahi attano natho*. The self is competent.

There's a passage where Ven. Ananda talks about how even though conceit is something we try to get rid of ultimately, still you have to use a certain amount of conceit on the path—conceit here meaning the sense of "I am." In this particular case, "I am competent." You see that other people can put an end of suffering. They're human beings; you're a human being. If they can do it, why can't you do it?

You also need to have a sense of self that you feel will benefit from this path. Otherwise, you're not going to do it. There's a passage where the Buddha says that you take your sense of self as your governing principle. If you feel like giving up on the path, you ask yourself, "I got on this path because I wanted to put an end to suffering—have I abandoned that desire?" After all, you want to be the person who no longer has to suffer.

If you really love yourself, you stick with the path. That sense of self-love, that sense of competence, the sense of responsibility: Those aspects of self are things you're actually going to need on the path.

The thing is, though, we have many different senses of self. And in the Buddha's analysis, each sense of self is part of what he calls "becoming." It's a process by which you focus a desire on something and then, around that desire, you develop a sense of a world and a sense of you in that world. The world relevant to that desire is anything that would either help you or get in the way of your attaining that desire. And your sense of "you" in that world includes the self as the provider: Do you have the wherewithal to attain that desire, and if you don't, what can you do? If you do, how do you go about getting it? You're also the self as the consumer, the self that will enjoy having that desire fulfilled.

All of this process—this sense of the world, this sense of yourself in the world, centered around that desire, or centered on that desire: That’s becoming. It’s a process we do all the time. It’s the process by which we were born into this world to begin with. At the end of your last life, when your mind was casting around for someplace to go, the possibility of becoming a human being came up, and you said, “Let’s go for it.” But the processes of becoming on the small scale happen in the mind all the time, and the Buddha saw the connection between the large becoming of your being here and the smaller becomings of the identities you take on in your mind as you think about different things you might like, might want. He saw that the bigger becomings come from the little becomings.

But he saw that in all cases of becoming there’s going to be suffering. So the purpose of the path is to learn how to get to the point where you don’t need to create becomings anymore, by getting to a place where there’s no need for desire. It’s not that you stifle or deny your desires. The Buddha tried that path and it didn’t work. The path that did work was to focus his desires on taking these aggregates, these raw materials from which we create our sense of self—the form of your body, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness: taking these things that we normally grab onto to create a sense of self in a particular becoming, and turning them into a path. Even though there may be some becoming on the path, this is a different kind of becoming, one that leads to the end of becoming.

When getting the mind concentrated right now, you’ve got all the aggregates right here. There’s the form of the body as your object, your sense of the breath that lets you know the body’s here. Feeling: the feeling of pleasure you’re trying to create. Perception: the image you hold in mind of the breath, and the body and the mind. Fabrication: your internal conversation in which you’re talking to yourself about how well it’s going and what needs to be done to improve it. And then consciousness, your awareness of all these things. All these things are present in a state of concentration. The difference is that, instead of just lugging around our different sense of self, we use these things as a path. It’s like the difference between carrying lots of bags of cement over your shoulder and putting the cement down, mixing it, and paving a path for yourself. There may be some stress in mixing the cement and following the path, but it’s stress that serves a purpose, leading to the end of stress. So it’s worthwhile.

As for the part of the mind that says, “Well, where am I in all of this?” Remember, that insistence of “who am I?” comes from part of your calculation: “Am I going to receive the results of these actions?” That’s the question underlying why we keep wanting to know, “What am I? What am I? How does the Buddha define me?” But he doesn’t define you. You define yourself by your desires. The Buddha’s basically saying that any way you define yourself, there’s going to be suffering. But at the same time, he’s not saying that there is no self, simply that this activity of “selfing” involves stress and suffering.

So we follow the path. He promises that at the end of the path there will be a happiness so complete that there will be no need for desire, no need to form any sense of self or world around that happiness. The happiness will be totally complete and self-sufficient. As Ajaan

Suwat used to like to say, once you attain that happiness, the question of who's there experiencing it, or if there's nobody there, doesn't occur to the mind at all. The happiness is sufficient, in and of itself. After all, our activities are for the sake of happiness, and the Buddha was able to find an activity that leads to a happiness that lasts, a happiness that doesn't require the activities of maintenance. It's total, reliable, harmless, and it doesn't require a sense of self to maintain it. So your selfing activity can stop; the activity of becoming can stop.

As for the question that's eating away in the back of the mind, "Is there anything left in there? Will I be left in there?": The Buddha says that once you attain this level, that question doesn't occur to you anymore. You don't need it. The reason you ask these questions is because you're still wound up in the process of becoming because every other happiness you've found in the world depends on your becoming. This one, though, is a happiness that, even though it requires some becoming to get there, once you're there, you can put all becoming aside. The path doesn't cause this happiness, but it takes you there, just as the road to the Grand Canyon doesn't cause the Grand Canyon, but if you follow the road, you get there. Once you've arrived at the Grand Canyon, you don't need the road anymore.

So, allow yourself to imagine a happiness that's that total. That act of imagination is part of your motivation. You're going to need it to remind yourself that this will be worthwhile. Then focus all of your energy on the path, because you don't get to the goal simply by imagining the goal. You get to the goal by following the path. Again, it's something you do.

So be alert, mindful, and ardent in what you do. Make sure you do it right. And someday you'll be sure to arrive.