A Sense of Yourself

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An important part of the practice is having a sense of yourself. The Buddha calls that “atthanyuddha.” It’s like going into battle. Before you choose your battles, you have to ask yourself, “Am I strong enough to take this on? Is it worth it?” A lot of times when you realize you don’t have the strength to take on a particular battle, you have to be willing to say, “No, not yet.” Or maybe, “No, not at all.” You think of the forest ajahn as being really brave. But Ajahn Lee and Ajahn Foon would both talk very freely about times when they did not take on a battle. They came out looking like losers. But they realized that these were not battles that were worth taking on. Because they didn’t have the strength. Or it would have cost too much in terms of their reputation, their time, their energy. Ajahn Lee talks about the time when he was in Burma. A group of Burmese people had gotten together, formed a committee. They wanted to present him with some land to build a monastery. He talked about this to the Thai Ambassador. Apparently the Thai Ambassador had some connections back in Bangkok. When Ajahn Lee got back to Bangkok and started looking into how this might succeed, he found out there was a senior monk in Bangkok who said, “This senior monk was not involved in the project. It wasn’t going to succeed.” Ajahn Lee knew that he didn’t have that many connections in the bureaucracy, so he just dropped the whole thing. He went off into the forest for a while. He says he would look like a loser. He looked like he was afraid. But he just realized that some battles are not worth taking on. Or he wasn’t strong enough to take them on. Ajahn Foon talks about a similar time. He was in Wat Thammasatit. He woke up in the middle of the night one time and heard there were a group of people who were stealing the generator, which generated electricity. He knew who they were. He recognized their voices. He also knew that if he went down to confront them, they could do him physical harm. He realized it wasn’t worth it. So they stole the generator. And it was just their karma then. So there are times in life when you have to say, “I’m not up for this particular battle. I’ll put it aside. Maybe look like a loser. But what you look like doesn’t matter, because you have other battles that you have to take on.” As Buddha said, the sign of wisdom is knowing what duties fall to you, what duties don’t fall to you. You take on the duties that do fall to you, and you leave aside the ones that don’t. And so the duties that do fall to you, regardless, when dealing with your defilements, you have to take them on. You can’t just give in to your greed, aversion, and delusion. You have to have a sense that you are competent to take them on. You have the tools you need. If you don’t have the tools you need, you’re going to work on them. And this is where having a sense of yourself comes in. The Buddha defines it in terms of six qualities. The first one is conviction. How much conviction do you have? In the teaching, how much conviction do you have in this path that leads to the end of suffering? And if you find trouble getting yourself to take on the path, or to get back on the path if you’ve been off, how can you talk to yourself to remind yourself that you do want to put an end to suffering? And here’s someone who says it’s possible. And they lay out a path. So you owe it to yourself to take on the path. Whatever you can do to remind yourself of the dangers of not taking on the path, and the advantages of taking it on. Even if it’s going to take a while, and it’s going to require a lot out of you, you’re willing to do it. We hear so much about the instantaneous path, that we’re already awakened, our nature is already awakened, all you have to do is just relax into your awakened nature. It sounds like there’s no battle at all. There’s nothing really to do. In fact, it’s all about not doing anything. But the Buddha never used images like that in his description of what you have to do. People taking on the path, he says, are like soldiers. They’re like elephants in battle. People trying to master a skill. And when you master a skill, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t work. And you have to have the ability to encourage yourself to stick with it, even when the going is tough. The studies they’ve done of people who really excel in their fields show that they all had a very live sense of the advantages that came from mastering the skill, and a very live sense of the dangers that came from not mastering the skill. That’s how you develop your conviction. Learn how to talk to yourself. Correcting any voices inside that get lazy, and they get cynical. Because what do they have to offer? Really nothing at all. So that’s the first quality, is having a sense of conviction. The second quality you want to test in yourself is how much virtue do you have? How are your precepts? Where could you improve on them? Similarly with the third quality, generosity. How generous are you with your time, with your energy? Because an important part of the path is composed of the heart qualities that come with generosity. Your sympathy for other beings. Your sense that you have more than enough. You develop that sense of inner wealth by being generous. That gives a lot of energy. The fourth quality is learning. Why should we learn the Dhamma? It doesn’t require that you learn the whole Tripitaka, the whole Pali Canon. Just have enough familiarity with the basic principles. Have a good idea of what the path is like. Have a general idea of where you’re going and what’s needed. Because there’s so much misinformation out there. Again, the idea that just relaxing into your already existing awareness counts as mindfulness. It’s not mindfulness. You’re just relaxing into the aggregate of consciousness. That’s something you have to comprehend, to see where you’re clinging to it. It’s not a place to rest. It’s something you have to investigate. And that’s when you have to use real mindfulness, which is the ability to keep things in mind, to keep your duties in mind as you take on the path. So you know what has to be comprehended, what has to be abandoned, what has to be developed. You’re mindful. You’re also alert. You’re very clearly seeing what you’re doing and the results of what you’re getting. It’s not just a general awareness of the present moment. It’s a very specific awareness of what your decisions are, why you’re making those decisions, and what the results are. And finally, ardency. You’re trying to do this really well. That’s where it becomes a skill. As the Buddha said, how do you develop mindfulness? You practice all factors of the youthful path. There’s a belief in some places that there’s the path of mindfulness that leads to awakening. There’s a separate path of concentration that leads to awakening. The path bifurcates. But it doesn’t bifurcate. There’s one path. And you’re going to develop your mindfulness by practicing right concentration. Which is one of the factors of the path. That means it’s devoted to getting the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being. So use your powers of mindfulness, alertness, ardency for that purpose. And when you know what the Canon actually says on these topics, it helps protect you from so much misinformation that’s out there. The fifth quality is your ingenuity. The Buddha lays out the path in very general steps. And you have to figure out how you’re going to apply it to your life. How you’re going to apply it to your specific problems. This is where you develop your own discernment, which is the sixth quality. You try things out. See what works, what doesn’t work. And in the course of trying things out, you get a good sense of cause and effect. The Buddha defines discernment in this case as being the penetrating knowledge of arising and passing away. The fact that it’s penetrating means you’re not just watching things coming and going. You’re trying to understand why they come and what they do when they come. And if they’re skillful, what you can do to maintain them. And if they’re not skillful, what you can do to get rid of them. So it’s all very active. You’re playing a huge role in this path. Which is why the Buddha doesn’t say there is no self. Ultimately he says you will get to the point where you don’t need your sense of self because the sense of self is part of a strategy. Trying to figure out what in your experience is worth holding on to, and what’s not, for the sake of finding happiness. And once you’ve made up your mind that you’re going to follow this path, then the question is, which aspects of you, of the many you’s in your mind, are really going to be helpful in the path, and which ones are not? You have to sort through them. Because you’re going to be doing battle with your defilements. And who are your defilements? Members of the committee of the mind. And if they have all the power, if they have all the selves, and you have no self, who’s going to do battle? Who’s going to have the techniques? Who’s going to have the skills? Who’s going to be able to work on the skills that are needed? You’ve got to develop a skillful sense of self. This is why the Buddha says the self is its own mainstay. You use the self as a governing principle to keep you on the path. Use your sense of competence. And if other people can do this, they’re human beings. I’m a human being. If they can do it, why can’t I? So the Buddha does encourage you to develop a healthy sense of self on the path as part of your strategy to find the happiness that lies at the end of the path. When you get to the end of the path, you have ultimate happiness. You don’t need that strategy anymore. You can put it aside. But some people think the ultimate step is going to be letting go of your sense of self. So why don’t you let go of your sense of self right now? We have to use it first, before we let it go. It’s like tools building a piece of furniture. If you say, well, ultimately I’ll be letting go of the tools, so I’ll just let go of the tools. You’ve got a pile of wood there. Nothing’s going to happen to the pile of wood if you let go of your tools too early. You use them, pick them up when necessary, put them down when you don’t need them, pick them up again when you do need them again. Then finally, when that piece of furniture is done, then you put the tools down. And you’ve got the desk or the table or the chair that you wanted. So learn to have a clear sense of yourself and develop parts of yourself that need to be developed. Because this is the duty that does fall to you. This is the battle that you do have to take on if you want to find the end of suffering, if you want to find true happiness. As for other battles outside, sometimes you have to lose, but they’re not nearly as important as winning this battle. And this is where you focus all your attention, all your energy, and learn how to define yourself as someone who practices. And anything else inside that doesn’t want to practice, you don’t have to identify with it. That’s how you use the concept of not-self as you’re on the path. This is where the battle is really worth fighting. And really worth winning. So don’t let other conflicts get in the way. Because so many times you might win in another conflict, but you create a lot of karma. But if you win with this conflict, there’s no karma left at all. You’re totally free. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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