

## *Self-Control*

*May 27, 2005*

When people stay at one place, they tend to accumulate a lot of things. When they move, they have to sort through their things. That's when you begin to realize how little you really need. Sometimes it's difficult. You want this, you want that. But finally the choice has to come down to: What do you *really* need? You can't take everything with you. The more you try to take with you, the more you get weighed down.

The same principle applies to our lives. When we forget about the fact that we're going to get old and ill, we're going to die, we tend to accumulate a lot of things we claim as being ours or us. Our sense of priorities gets dulled. Everything that we can lay our hands on is ours. Your sense of who you are tends to accumulate a lot of excess baggage, too. But the time will come when you have to go. And what will you take with you then?

Ajaan Suwat once noted that—it's hard to say it's a paradox—he just noted the contrast, for all the things the Buddha says are not self, not self, not self, still he says that we're the owners of our actions. Those are things that do belong to us, something we have control over: our intentions. You can choose to do one thing, or you can choose to do another. In that lies your power for good or for evil, for happiness or for misery. That's what we take with us.

This is why this should have top priority. It's one of the reasons why you focus on the present moment in the meditation, so that you can see your intentions clearly. You can see the states of mind that motivate them, that drive them. All you have to do is see that much, and that can make all the difference in the world.

The problem is that, for the most part, we've learned to lie to ourselves not only about our intentions, but also about the motivations lying behind them. Either we deny that we did something, or we deny that there were some less than stellar motives behind what we did. When this is the case, we really are in trouble, because the main factor or the main power in our lives is something we're blind to. When we are blind to it, it's not really under our control. Because we are so busy focusing on other things, we neglect the true power in our lives.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha teaches us not-self, to tell us to look around to see what really does lie under our control, because the sense of control or the idea of control is essential for our idea of who we are. If we don't control something, how can we really claim it as our self? How can we really claim it as ours?

Now, our intentions do lie under our control, so this is where we focus. You want to make sure that your intentions are based on skillful desires, skillful motivations: no greed, no anger, no delusion. That requires a lot of strength. Most people live their lives in line with what the texts call *yatha kamma*, which means in line with your past actions. Your past actions push you in particular way and you just keep going along with the flow. Whatever comes up in your life, you let yourself get swayed by it. Good things come up, you're in a good mood. Bad things come up, you're in a bad mood. And the only way you can get yourself in a good mood is try to make sure as many good things come up as possible.

But no matter how good the world is, as that passage we just chanted now says, the world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There's no one in charge. There's nothing in the world that's really our own. So no matter how good the world is, it's never all that good.

This is why the Buddha decided, when he had the choice either to rule or to go out and become a Buddha, he took the latter course. As a ruler, he could have done whatever he wanted to help people under his power, but he couldn't save them from aging, illness, and death. He couldn't prevent untoward things from happening to them, no matter how hard he tried.

So rather than trying to set up good outside circumstances for them, he took the path of teaching them how to live peacefully, how to live lives of integrity in the midst of all kinds of situations, good or bad. That was a great gift, because this is one teaching that can be used in all circumstances. It's a skill that can be used in all circumstances: learning how to resist the negative impulses that come from negative things outside.

We had a visitor today, a Thai man who was complaining about having to go back to Thailand and drive there. He said there are no rules at all. His mother came along and she complained that it made her very tense to ride with him in Thailand, because he was always getting tense about the traffic. He asked, how can you not get tense about the traffic? You have to come out to a quiet place like this, he says, in order to make your mind quiet. But I told him, the whole purpose of the teaching is to keep your mind quiet in the midst of unquiet things, chaos, negative things. He said, how could you do that? It's impossible. He totally missed the message of the Buddha, which is that it is possible to maintain stillness of mind in the midst of the craziest circumstances.

That's the skill we're working on here. That's the Buddha's gift to us, showing us the skill of learning how to treasure our virtue, our concentration, our discernment, as our most important possessions—how to protect our intentions to make sure that they're not simply pushed around by negative things outside.

You look around at the world and it's hardly ideal at all. We're living in bad times. Even in the midst of good times, there are still aging, illness, and death. They can't be stopped no matter how much we try to pretend they're not there. Old people get pushed off to old people homes. Sick people get pushed off into hospitals and hospices. Dead people disappear from accident scenes as quickly as possible. We try to deny these the facts, but they can't be denied. They're there all the time.

What we need is a skill in learning how to deal with aging, illness, and death without suffering from them. This is precisely the skill the Buddha taught, so that no matter how much pain there is, no matter how much injustice there is in the world, we can still maintain our equilibrium. We don't let somebody else's injustice make us become unjust. We don't let somebody else's misbehavior become an excuse for our misbehavior. We learn how to resist these things. We learn the skills in resisting. In other words, you have to learn what things you have to stand up for, and what things you have to make yourself as streamlined as possible to let the currents of the world flow right past.

One of the skills you need as a meditator is learning how to deal with loud noises while you're meditating. Think of the body as an enormous screen, like the screen on a window, and the sound can go right through the holes. In other words, you don't set up resistance to things like that. Just let them pass, pass, pass. There are a lot of events in the world that have to be like that, too. Don't put yourself in a position where you're affected by them. The less you lay claim to them as being yours or your necessities for happiness on the external level, the less you're likely to be attacked by events of the world.

Then on the other hand, there are things you *do* have to stand up for. You have to stand up for your principles. When the choice comes that you have to act, you want to make sure that you act on principles of integrity. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha expressed the precepts in such short phrases, and not long roundabout discussions of principle. Simply: You don't kill, you don't steal, you don't have illicit sex, you don't lie, you don't take intoxicants. Period.

Often, when a situation is difficult, when the winds of change reach hurricane force, you need those simple guidelines to live by, to keep reminding yourself that no matter what, no matter how bad things seem outside, you're not going to give in to those pressures.

In other words, the Buddha's teaching you to be a warrior, and giving you a sense of which battles need to be fought and which battles don't need to be fought. If you go battling everything, you're not a very smart warrior. You have to have a sense of which battles can be won, which battles *have* to be won, which

battles are worth trying to win, and which battles you don't have to bother with. The big battle is just this one: making sure that your intentions don't get swayed by outside events in a way that would make you do something unskillful against your principles.

This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration, to make the mind strong. And we develop discernment to figure out what our real battles are. You're sitting here with the breath, and nothing outside is happening at all, but you find the mind wandering out of control. If that's the way your mind is, how can you trust it not to go wandering way out of control when there are really negative things outside? You've got to work on this habit. When mind wanders off, you don't follow it. Just stay right here. Thoughts may wander, but you don't have to wander after them. If you don't wander after them, after a while they don't have any pulling power over you. You've learned how to let go. They'll come back and pester you again, but you don't have to get involved with them. You just stay right here with the breath.

All the skills you need in order to stay right here are the important ones. We're developing strength of the mind, and then you use your discernment to figure out exactly what you really need in order to maintain a sense of well-being, how little you can get by with. It's like knowing you have to move: You've got to sort through your possessions to figure out which ones are essential, which ones are not.

This is why monks are taught to go out into the forest every now and then. When you go out, you don't want to go out laden down with too many things, just what's essential. That gives you a good perspective on life. The Buddha's teachings on discernment in general is just this sort of thing: knowing you're going to have to leave some day, so what do you really want to take with you? That comes down to you what kind of actions you want to look back on in your life. If you want to look back on actions that are principled, inspiring, noble, then act in those ways, create those actions in your life, and develop the qualities of mind in terms of virtue, concentration, and discernment that make it easier to act in those ways.

Years back, John McPhee wrote about a time in Alaska when he was visiting a couple who were subsistence farmers in the forest there. He was embarrassed about the fact that he'd brought along a little inflatable pillow. He wasn't a really roughing it the way they did. The wife told him, "We're not here roughing it, we're actually trying to smooth it out here in the rough." This is what the practice is for us here as well. We're trying to smooth things to makes it easier for us to behave in a way that we would admire.

Sometimes there are tough decisions, but if you develop your skills in terms of virtue, concentration, and discernment, you find it easier and easier to make those tough decisions. One of them is to pare down your sense of what you really need for your happiness, so that fewer and fewer things can threaten you. Another is to develop your strength of mind so that it can withstand the push of thoughts and emotions that would make you do or say or think unskillful things. When you've developed these strengths, when you've learned how to pare down your belongings, then you're ready to wander in the world without being affected by the world. Then you can trust the path you're following to take you where you really want to go.