

A Strong Sense of Self

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Start with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is a wish for happiness, a wish for true happiness, and you realize that because true happiness comes from within, your true happiness doesn't have to conflict with anyone else's. That's one of the reasons why goodwill is an attitude that can be made limitless.

Most of the time, our goodwill is partial. We have goodwill for people we like, people who've been good to us, and not for people who've been bad to us. That's a typical human attitude, but here we try to make that attitude a sublime attitude—the attitude of the brahmas, who can have goodwill for all beings—and we do that for our own good, because if we can have ill will for someone, it's very easy to act in unskillful ways around that person, and that then becomes our karma. For the sake of our own true happiness, we want to have goodwill for everybody and act skillfully around everybody.

So start with goodwill for yourself. Tell yourself, “May I be truly happy. May I understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.” Then extend the same thought to others: “May they understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.”

In other words, goodwill doesn't mean, “May you be happy doing whatever you're doing, good or bad.” If you find yourself acting in unskillful ways, and you really have goodwill for yourself, you want to change your ways.

Then you can extend this thought to others. You can extend it to everybody without hypocrisy and it provides the framework for your practice. You're practicing for true happiness.

As the Buddha said, discernment begins with a question—“What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?”—which is his way of basically saying that the pursuit of true happiness is a good thing, something to be encouraged. It's wise, and what's wise about the question is realizing, one, happiness is going to have to depend on your actions; two, long-term is possible; and then, three, long-term is better than short-term.

So you look to your actions. Look to your mind because the mind is the source

of all your actions. This is why we meditate.

Those are some preparatory thoughts for getting the mind to settle down here in the present moment, because when the mind settles in the present moment, it can watch itself clearly, see what it's doing, and catch itself in time if it's about to do something unskillful.

So when we want to be anchored in the present moment, we anchor ourselves in the breath. Notice when the breath is coming in; notice when it's going out. Notice how it feels. You can try long breathing for a while, to see how that feels, and if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. You can try shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower.

Wherever you feel the breath most prominently in the body, focus your attention there and watch it steadily so that you can judge what feels good. It's good to choose a spot in the body that's very sensitive, because that will alert you when the breath is suddenly not feeling comfortable anymore. After all, the needs of the body will change as the mind settles down, so the type of breathing that feels good for the body will also change. So, keep an eye on the breath. Try to be as sensitive as you can to how the breathing feels.

It's a whole-body process, so think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. And you're taking charge of what's going on right now. This is one of those areas where a healthy perception of self is going to be very useful: the healthy self in charge of the meditation.

When the Buddha taught self and not-self, he never answered the question as to whether there is a self or is not a self. He never even tried to define what a self could be. He simply noted that we have lots of different perceptions of self, lots of different ways of perceiving not-self, and then went on to answer the question, What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? That question forms the framework for developing discernment. Applied to the question of self and not-self, it becomes: When is the perception of self conducive to true happiness, and when is perception of not-self conducive to true happiness?

Right now, you're going to take control of your acts of attention to focus in on the present moment—that's yours for the time being—and focus on your ability to adjust the breath—that will be yours as well. As for any other thoughts that come into the mind right now, you can label them as not-self—in other words,

nothing you want to get involved with. The perceptions of self and not-self are basically value judgments as to what's worth getting involved with, what's not; what's worth trying to control, what's not. And the judgments will change as your practice progresses.

When Ajaan Fuang had me answer that letter from the student in Singapore, this is basically what he was saying: that the real problem is that the *mind* is inconstant, stressful, not-self. You've got to learn how to make it constant, easeful, and under your control, to whatever extent you can. So when the mind wanders off, just drop the thought, whatever it is, and come right back. You'll find that you don't have to pull the mind back; it comes back naturally. But then it can just as naturally slip off again. So be alert, and every time a thought goes out, let the thought go out, but you don't have to follow it. Label the thought as not-self: "This is not mine right now, nothing for me to get involved with. It's not worth getting involved with," and in that way, the chatter on the edges of the mind doesn't pull you away.

But when the breath starts feeling good in the spot you've been focusing on, it's very easy to drop the breath and focus on the sense of comfort. In that case, you lose the basis of your concentration. So the Buddha's next recommendation is to breathe in and out aware of the whole body. And it's good to build up to that whole-body awareness by going through the body first, section by section.

You can start down around the navel. With each part of the body you focus on, locate that part of the body in your awareness; watch it for a while as you breathe in, breathe out, to see what rhythm of breathing feels good there; and if there's any tension or tightness in that part of the body, just think of it relaxing. There's no need for the tension to build up as you breathe in, and you don't have to hold on to any tension as you breathe out.

When you begin with the navel, then you can then go up to the solar plexus, the middle of the chest, base of the throat, middle of the head, down the shoulders and the arms, down the back, out the legs. Go through the body as many times as you like. Establish this as your territory. Here again, the perception of self is useful.

If you've been around the body a couple times, then you can think "whole body." Let your attention settle at any spot in the body that you like. It can be the

middle of the head, the middle of the chest, but think of your awareness radiating out to fill the whole body from that spot, and think of all the cells in the body participating in the breath.

This is how you establish the body in the present moment as your territory. Your attention becomes more constant. There's a sense of ease and well-being. And it'll take a while to get a sense that you're able to control this, to maintain this balance, but with time and with persistence, you find that this becomes more and more your natural home.

There's a sense of the breath not only *in* the body, but also *surrounding* the body. Ajaan Lee mentions this in a couple spots in his teachings, that the breath surrounds the body. This is where you can build that sense of having a shield as you go into the world, and again, you're maintaining the sense that this is your territory, this is your energy field, and you don't have to get it mingled with other people's.

We do have that feeling, especially when we want to connect with someone, that we have to open up our energy field. We may not be thinking consciously of it, but there is a subconscious sense that we're going to open up our energy field so that we can connect. What you're actually doing, though, is that you're allowing someone else's energy into your territory, which is not always a good thing. You want to maintain this sense that, "Okay, this is my territory. Outside of this is not mine, but right here is my territory." Here again, the perception of self is useful, because you do want to protect the state of your mind, the state of your energy, because when the energy gets depleted, it's very easy for the mind to go back to its old, scattered ways.

The Buddha has that discourse—we mentioned it last week—describing how he first got onto the path by dividing his thoughts into two types: thoughts that were skillful; thoughts that were unskillful. The unskillful ones came out of sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness, and they would lead to unskillful actions. Whereas skillful thoughts came from renunciation, non-ill will, harmlessness. These led to skillful actions. In other words, he learned to look at his thoughts, not in terms of how much he liked them, but where they came from and where they were going.

So he kept the unskillful thoughts in check, and as for the skillful thoughts, he

would allow them free range. He made a comparison to a cowherd. During the rainy season, the cowherd has to be very careful, because the cows can get into the rice growing in the rice fields, eat the rice, and the cowherd would be in a lot of trouble. So every time the cows look like they're going for the rice, he has to beat them back. That's how the Buddha would treat his unskillful thoughts. He beat them back.

As for skillful thoughts, he would allow them free range. This would be the cowherd during the dry season: The rice has been harvested and put away in the granary, and the cows can't get into trouble, so he would just lie under a tree and be aware of the fact that "Okay, the cows are out there someplace. When the time comes, we'll bring them home," but he wouldn't have to keep them under control.

But the Buddha did notice that when you allow your mind to think skillful thoughts for 24 hours, it gets tired. This is one of reasons why we try to maintain this quiet center inside as much as we can, so that we have a source of strength. The Buddha lists this as one of the five strengths of your mind.

The first strength is conviction. In classical terms, this is conviction in the Buddha's awakening. What it comes down to, though, is conviction in the power of your actions, because how did the Buddha awaken? He awakened through his own efforts, and as he said, it was because of qualities he had that were not peculiar to him, qualities that anybody could develop: heedfulness, ardency, and resolution. So if you have conviction in his awakening, you have conviction in the power of your own actions to make a difference in leading to happiness or to suffering. So why act in ways that lead to suffering?

You're convinced in your power to make a difference by the way you think, by the way you speak, and by the way you act. That's a strength, because people who don't have that belief are weak and evasive. If you're weak in that way, all kinds of pressures—pressures from friends, pressures from society—can push you around. But if you're convinced that their pressure doesn't mean anything compared to what you choose to do, then you're going to be a lot more careful about what you choose to do and you end up doing good things, at least making the effort to do good things.

That's the second strength, persistence. You just stick with it. You recognize what's skillful and what's not, and you do your best to give rise to the desire to do

what is skillful, and then to act on that desire. There, too, a sense of self is important. You see the dangers of unskillful thoughts, and you see the benefits that come from developing skillful thoughts, so you realize that the heedful thing to do is to be as skillful as you can in what you choose to do, and say, and think.

Here again, your sense of self is important as a motivation. You realize that, on the one hand, you have it within your power to choose what course of action you're going to take, and then, two, you'll benefit from following the skillful course and you'll suffer if you don't.

Then to back up this persistence, the Buddha also teaches mindfulness, concentration, and discernment as sources of strength.

The good lessons you've learned from the past, you keep in mind. You don't have to keep running them through your mind, but just have them there available, so that when you come up with a problem in the meditation or a problem in daily life, you can recall, "Oh, this, this is the skillful way to act here." That's the strength of mindfulness.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha gives such graphic analogies and stories to illustrate his teachings, so that they stick in your mind. He has the story of the woman who had a reputation for being kind and gentle. She had a slave, and the slave started thinking, "My mistress here has a reputation for being kind and gentle. Now, is that because I'm a good worker? I never do anything to be criticized. Or is she really kind and gentle all the time? Let's test her." So the slave gets up late one morning, and the mistress calls her, "Why are you getting up so late?" "Oh, no reason, madam." The mistress begins to scowl, and the slave says to herself, "Ah, she does have anger. Let's test her further." So the next morning and for days after that, she gets up later and later, and the mistress every day gets progressively more and more violent in her reaction, until finally she grabs a rolling pin and whacks the slave over the head. Then the slave goes out and shows her handiwork to the rest of the people in the neighborhood. So from that point on, the mistress's reputation changes. She's no longer kind and gentle. As far as the neighbors are concerned, she's harsh and mean.

I have a student who really hates this story. She says, "Why did the slave do such a stupid thing? Is the Buddha praising her behavior?" Well, no. The whole point of the story is that there are some people who are kind and gentle just

because situations are good, but if the situations are not good, they're not going to be so good. If you really are genuinely good—in your heart, in your attitudes, no matter what the situation is—you'll always be good to other people. That's a lesson to keep in mind.

So as I said, the Buddha gives lots of analogies like this, lots of stories, so that you can remember them easily. They enrich your mindfulness, and through your mindfulness they promote your persistence.

Based on mindfulness and persistence, you get the mind into concentration, and the concentration becomes a new source of strength. Based on that, you develop discernment. When you see the ways you're acting that lead to suffering and you realize, "I don't have to do that," that takes a huge burden off the mind.

So we develop these strengths inside. This is an important way of developing a strong, healthy sense of self: the self that, on the one hand, is capable and responsible. On the other hand, it's the self that will benefit from all this practice.

Questions of self and not-self are value judgments. As you're working on the path, trying to cultivate this healthy sense of self, there will come a point when you don't need it anymore. In fact, at the very end, it's going to be the one thing standing in the way of total freedom. But as long as you need it, be very clear about what you want to do in the path that benefits your healthy sense of self.

The things that would pull you away from the path, you can label as not-self, consistently not worth following. Then, when the path is fully developed, okay, that's when you can let go of everything.

You might think of your sense of self as like pencil marks that a carpenter puts on a piece of furniture as he makes it to make sure that the wood fits together. The pencil marks guide him to cut the wood at the right place, to nail it at the right place, but then when the piece is done, he doesn't leave the pencil marks there. He erases them.

So try to have a sense of when your perception of self is useful and when it's not. As long as it helps you on the path, hold on to it. Otherwise, as Ajaan Lee would say, you let go of everything from the very beginning, and you end up with nothing, which leaves you no better off than before. He calls it letting go like a pauper: You start with nothing and you end with nothing. But if you learn how to let go properly, you let go of the things that cause you suffering, and you hold on

to the things that help you. The things that help you will eventually deliver you to a place where you don't have to hold on anymore. That's when you totally let go. But you don't let go totally until you reach that point.

That's letting go like a wealthy person. You have wealth and you don't need to carry it around with you all the time, but even though you don't have it on your person, you still have it, and it's there for you to use whenever you need it.