

The Riddle of “I Am”

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As Ajaan Suwat once pointed out, there is an important riddle to contemplate in the practice. On the one hand, the Buddha said that all phenomena are not self, and seeing things in that way is part of the path. On the other hand, there is that point we're supposed to contemplate everyday: "I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, whatever I do for good or for evil to that will I fall heir." There is very definitely an "I am" there.

So it's good to think about that riddle. It relates to the point that, while we're practicing the path, we're actually trying to develop a certain state of mind, or what's called a state of becoming. Becoming happens on three levels, there is sensuality, there's form, and there is formlessness. We are trying to create a state of form, staying with the breath, inhabiting the whole body, seeing the whole body as breath, being aware of the whole body as breath. Now to get there you have to put aside sensuality, your fascination with your sensual desires, because it's only when the mind is in the state of form that it can see things clearly. It can watch the processes in the mind very clearly. When you're dealing more with sensuality, you are more focused on the object of your desire, and the processes of the mind get very muddled. So we do what we can to put aside our sensual desires to focus more on desires for the state of form, the ease and the pleasure in the sense of refreshment, fullness that comes from inhabiting the body in this way. When the breath feels easy, unblocked, connected, there's a sense of abundant breath energy all around the body that we can tap into it anytime, so the breath isn't a struggle, the breath can be effortless. That's a sense of well-being, and it's possible to get attached to it, and you actually do have to get attached to it if you want to get good at it, to stay here, long enough so you really can observe the process of what's involved in creating the state of becoming to begin with.

Now as the Buddha says, becoming comes from clinging and craving. We all know that clinging and craving are part of the cause of suffering, but they also play a role in the path to the end of suffering. By learning how to use them wisely and skillfully, they can actually take you around the problem of suffering and attack it from a different direction.

Now, clinging comes in four types: sensual clinging, clinging to views, clinging to habits and practices, and clinging to doctrines of the self. That first kind of clinging, sensual clinging, is no help at all in giving rise to a state of good strong concentration. You need a certain amount of sensual pleasure for concentration, i.e. the body needs the strength that comes from eating and a peaceful environment that provides a sense of well-being to get into states of concentration, especially in the beginning. As you get more practiced, you find that you can get into concentration in environments that are less and less conducive. But it's good to have a good quiet place to start with. This is why the Buddha emphasized going out into the wilderness, because the pleasures and beauties in the wilderness don't cost anything. They're just there. They provide the kind of quiet, refreshing background where it's easy for the mind to get settle down.

As for food, the Buddha has you be content with what you get, and to contemplate the food as you eat it, as to *why* you're eating it. The ideal purpose is to drive off feelings of hunger, to give the body the strength it needs in order to practice. So there is a fairly restricted range here for sensual pleasure, enough to give the mind the environment it needs to settle down, and get focused more on how to inhabit the body, this form of the body that we've got right here.

This involves the other three kinds of clinging. First, you cling to the view that concentration is going to be good, it's going to be helpful, it provides the spot where you can examine the processes in the mind in terms of what's causing suffering and what can lead to the end of suffering. Then you cling to the precepts that help provide the right environment for practicing concentration. These are the habits you cling to. You have to hold on to the idea that *you* are actually doing this. That's where the reflection on the "owner of my actions" comes in. That's as far as the Buddha goes in terms of defining the self. Other people would define self in terms of whether it's finite or infinite, whether it has form or it doesn't have form, whether it's eternal or not. As for the Buddha, he—for the purpose of the path—leaves the precise definition of that "I am" pretty much unexplained and unexplored. He has you take apart any attachment you might to a specific idea that you are this, or you are that, aside from this one: that you're the agent that does the action. You're also the person that experiences the quality of the action, depending on whether the action is skillful or unskillful. That much you maintain for a fair while along the path, until it's no longer useful.

So even though the Buddha doesn't go too far into the idea of what I am, there still is the idea that I am the owner and the heir of my actions. That's all you need in order to stay on the path—in the same way that he doesn't encourage sensual clinging, sensual passion, but he does have room for sensual pleasure on the path. In other words, he's more interested in your having a sense not so much of what you *are*, as of what you *do*. You are the doer. When you experience something, there's also a doing in the experiencing. You want to look for that as well, because it's not that you're sitting here totally passive, experiencing the results of past karma. You're also creating present karma, present intentions, right now. The intentions you have right now are going to determine what you experience and what you focus on, what you do with what you focus on. This doing is really important here.

So, for the purpose of the path, what you are doesn't go beyond what you are as the doer, so that you focus on not so much on your identity here, but the actual quality of your actions, the quality of your intentions. Your intention right now is to stay with the breath, to make the breath comfortable, to fill your awareness of the body with breath, to fill your body with your awareness so that the ease of the breath doesn't just simply put you to sleep. You want to be alert of what's called an enlarged awareness, an enlarged mind—*mahaggatam cittam*—because when your awareness is enlarged like this, it's a lot easier to see the processes in the mind, to see where there are still attachments to unskillful mental states, unskillful ideas.

So you start first by letting go of the unskillful things, realizing that you don't have to identify with them. Crazy thoughts come into your mind, stupid thoughts come into mind, harmful thoughts come into your mind, but you don't have to identify with them. Just see them for what they are as events coming and going in the mind. You can figure out how to let them go, while in the meantime you hold on to your concentration, you hold on to your precepts, you hold on to your right views. You hold on to the idea that you are capable of developing greater and greater skill. It's only when you don't need these things anymore that you totally let them go.

It's like that image of the raft. You need the raft to get across the river, so while you're on the raft, don't let it go. When you get to the other side, then you can put the raft aside. You don't need to carry it on your back. But make sure you don't let go of the raft in midstream, because this is the only way you are going to get across.

So as we practice, there are skillful attachments, there is skillful clinging. You're trying to hold to right view, because that's the kind of view that helps cut through all the things that focus our attention away from what we're doing and from the results of what we're doing. We hold to the precepts, we hold to the practice of concentration, because the precepts make life a lot easier, and concentration—when you can get the mind really, really still, with a sense of well-being and ease—really helps in seeing what's going on in the mind. The well-being and ease are important, because they put you in the right mood for noticing what you doing that's not skillful, and admitting it frankly with a good sense of humor, so that you can let those unskillful actions go in a good-natured way. Meanwhile, you hold on to the idea you are capable of doing this. You're responsible for the choices you're making. That's the raft.

So these are a few thoughts about that riddle that Ajaan Suwat posed. When you learn how to think in this way, it cuts through a lot of the other conundrums that people come up with, such as how can you get to the end unconditioned by doing conditioned things? And if you are supposed to let go of attachment, why are you holding onto the path? These are conundrums that come from not wanting to follow the path.

Think in terms of the raft. You're not holding onto the raft because you want to keep the raft forever, but it's what you need right now. It's like Ajaan Chah's comment, when someone ask you, you've got that coconut there, why are you carrying the husk too? Are you going to eat the husk? No. Then why are you carrying the husk? Because the time hasn't come yet to let it go. When you get home, cut up the coconut, put it into the curry, that's when you let go of the husk. In the mean time, right now, you need the husk to help you carry the coconut meat.

The Buddha's path is strategic. It's not simpleminded. Strategy sometimes requires that if you want to go left, you sometimes have to go right first. It's like going to Los Angeles from Wat Metta. It would make sense to drive northwest, because that's the direction in which Los Angeles lies, but there's no road going northwest straight from the monastery. If you went straight northwest from here, you'd get tangled in the chapparal and fall into gullies. The roads to LA require that you have go south first, and then east, then northeast, before you can go northwest . The important thing is that even with all these twists and turns, the road actually takes you to where you want to go. Always keep that point in mind.