

Energy Week 4: Ajahn Sucitto on Yes and No Boundaries

Some selections from Ajahn Sucitto's chapter on Stewarding Your Resources

Setting Wise Boundaries

Regulating and directing energy has to do with establishing boundaries. We must consider what is unskillful, what leads to harmful results and should be left aside. And we must consider what is skillful, what channels our energy towards that which is supportive and nourishing. The most obvious area that we should consider is our ethical standards — otherwise we're going to have to deal with the psychological and social mess, the furtiveness, and the guilt that comes from not making our ethical boundaries clear. Following on from that we can consider what we will attend to and act upon, what our priorities are, and what our area of concern is in any particular situation. We can bear in mind the reflection: 'Is this for my welfare, the welfare of others, and does it lead out of stress and towards peace?' Instead of setting up a boundary between self and other, this reflection aims for a boundary between intentions and action. Then we can check before we cross that boundary.

Boundaries around actions are necessary, and it's up to you to establish them. You can't just be passive; some things have to be deliberately left outside: 'No, this is doing me no good.' Or, 'That's not my concern right now; I don't need to do that.' There is a definite 'no' to that boundary. Make it firm, give it some energy, and it will look after you. You can't make much of a boundary out of, 'Well I suppose I ought to give that up, one day ...' or, 'Maybe ...' What does the energy of that feel like? On the other hand there also has to be a 'yes.' For example: 'I'm going to be fully with this. I've made a commitment; I'm going to see this through.' Then establish that with care and give it some energy. And even if you fail from time to time, still come back to those boundaries. Look into how they caved in or where they were too tight, and learn a few things.

Learning to establish a 'no' boundary means practicing some restraint. It means following up on the understanding that the mind works better if you don't load it with unnecessary things to look at, buy, have or worry about. If we don't establish that boundary, the mind can get swamped by useless input. So the Buddha advised us to work out what causes unskillful mind states to grow and what causes good mind states to grow, and to establish our boundaries accordingly. It can take determination: addictions like cigarettes, alcohol, or even work often take a lot of careful and repeated 'no's,' as well as the back-up of alternative ways to channel energy. The most important of these alternative ways will be actions of generosity, kindness and calming meditation, to bring healing to the heart that's been abused by these pursuits.

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The key point is that wherever your attention gets established then that's where your energy goes. And that energy and focus becomes your world. Whether it's meditation, music or computer science, your heart adopts the concerns, values and energy that go along with that. So is it worth giving yourself to? A lot of people are led astray and sucked dry by worldly values, and then spat out, like husks. They may have spent forty years working hard for a company, and then they are given the sack; so they feel lost and depressed, even suicidal, because they didn't put their attention where it would have served them best. This is tragic, because it isn't that people don't do good things,

but they don't put their attention on really knowing themselves and finding inner fulfillment. Instead, it's as if they belong to somebody else.

To summarize, energy has a fourfold application: first, to put aside what you feel is unhelpful, and secondly to keep guarding the mind against such unskillful influences; then thirdly to establish what you sense is good, and lastly to support and encourage those skillful influences. And it requires wise discernment, advice from experienced people and trial and error to know what's appropriate in a given situation.

Does your energy come from interest and aspiration, from willingness of heart? Or is it caught up with trying to climb the wrong mountain?

The 'Yes' Boundary

When you want to determine what to apply energy to, establish the 'yes' boundary around that which you truly want to pursue with aspiration, and maintain it with investigation and recollection. Putting appropriate energy into what you know is worthy will give rise to joy.

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So where does your sense of value and vitality arise? What comes alive for you when you ask yourself that question? Looking after and doing the best for your children? Serving the community? Investigating and developing Dhamma? It's up to you. This faith is brought forth by willingness (chanda). When you give of yourself freely and not because of what somebody else wants, says or does, there is beauty in the mind. ... At that moment, you are not thinking, 'What will I get out of it? What do other people think? Will I succeed? Am I capable of it?' If you wait until you think you're ready, the chances are you'll be waiting forever. We have to make a leap of faith based on intentions, rather than perceptions of self and other. Then just do it. Give a 'yes' to the faith and a 'no' to the wavering speculation. The more you doubt, the less steady your focus becomes; the less focused, the more agitated; the more agitated, the more you doubt. You have to break out of the doubt program with an act of faith, a 'yes' to good intentions. Sure you'll make mistakes, but if you stay within the boundaries of ethics and mindfulness, that's how you learn.

Reflections: spend time with some of Ajahn Sucitto's questions from this selection:

Where *do* you spend most of your energy? Does this energy come from interest and aspiration, from willingness of heart?

Where does your sense of value and vitality arise? What comes alive for you when you ask yourself that question?