

## Not Self: Finding Oneself - (3 of 5)

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So I would like to continue this evening on a topic that I've been doing the last two weeks, which is the Buddhist idea of self and not-self, and kind of explore it from different angles, and try play angles, and make some sense out of it. Since many people can't make any sense out of the Buddhist teachings on not-self when sometimes talked in a more philosophical way. So there is a story from the time of the Buddha's life where the Buddha was sitting in a pleasure park, in a park some place in a grove of trees, meditating. And nearby there came a group of aristocrats to enjoy the pleasure park, have a picnic. And apparently these young princes and their wives came and had to stay at this party and picnic. And one of the princes came with a courtesan because they get eaten, have a wife or something.

And after their picnic and their partying, whatever they did, they all took a nap. And while they were napping, the courtesan plucked all the jewelry off the aristocrats and went running away with all the jewelry. And so when these young men and women woke up from their naps and realized that they had been robbed, they went wandering through the pleasure park looking for this woman, thinking she might still be there. And they came across the Buddha meditating. So they came across the Buddha meditating, and they asked the Buddha, "Have you seen a woman walking by, wandering by?"

And the Buddha said, "What would you rather find, a woman or yourself?" And that got their attention, and so they all sat down. And the Buddha gave teachings to these young men and women, and many of them became the Buddha's disciples, students. A happy story, right? So what would you rather find: the perfect relationship, or yourself? What would you rather find: the greatest job, or yourself; a lot of money, the lottery, or yourself?

What would you rather find? What's an important thing to do in life? So here the Buddha

is pointing to what's more important, and there's something very important about finding oneself. And so what does that take to find oneself? And I think there's many answers to that question. Each of you happily has your own answer.

I would like to propose that one of things it could mean is slowing down long enough to be able to find out what you feel, what you think, what motivates you, what you believe, to find out what's really here in this psychophysical being here. Because I know it's very easy to be busy with life, busy with preoccupations, and that to really miss what is here, not even to pay attention, not even know what we believe or what's happening. So to slow down enough, or sit still enough, to listen very deeply. Well, there's a fit story that's often told in our circles.

And that I've told of from the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Rāma going through the jungle with some companions. And he hears this very faint voice calling out his name, "Rāma." And he asks his companions if they hear that voice, and no one hears it except for him. And so he goes through the jungle listening, and towards the sound, walking toward the sound. And finally he comes to this big boulder, and he hears that the sound, his name, "Rāma," is coming out of this boulder. And so he takes his hands and gently places and places it on the boulder, and at that point the boulder breaks open or dissolves or something.

And this beautiful goddess or deva or something comes forth from that boulder. And she had been somehow enchanted, or cast in a spell, and kept frozen captive in this boulder, or maybe a long time. And what's here interesting by the story is her name, her name is Alia, and Alia means home. So here Alia means snow. Home of the snow. So Alia, home. So that was her name, home.

So only he could hear this very faint whisper that was calling him home. Nice, so what's your faint whisper that's calling you home? And then he had to put his hands or can really be there, let it be there, so touch it. Something touched something very deeply. A few days ago, I heard Jon Kabat-Zinn talk about the dictionary entry in the Oxford dictionary for the word "touch," and I didn't look it up to find out, to confirm it. But he says that it's the longest entry in the Oxford dictionary.

It's longer than the entry for love, and it's touch. Not very basic. So to touch, what does it mean to be in touch, and each with yourself. However, when we go to find out who we are, which is, I think, the task of many spiritual traditions, some of the obvious answers to who we are start dissolving, start breaking open as we investigate and look at them. Some of things that we might think of, "This is who I really am," though, it doesn't stand up under scrutiny. And so it's a very interesting process of really looking deeply and finding out, "Wait a minute,

not this. This is not who I really am.”

And then we look more deeply, and no, that’s not either. We keep going towards something. Maybe we hear this name being called, and often it’s a process of shedding a lot of—some people sometimes will call it—false beliefs of who we are, arbitrary beliefs of who we are, limiting ways in which we think we are. And for some people, it becomes a bit of a mystery: Who am I? Who am I here? I’m supposed to find out who I am, but the more I look, the more mysterious it becomes.

So that process of account of the mystery of it all is very interesting, and I was first introduced to it not through Buddhism, but through the study of science. When I was a college student, I took various science classes like biology and botany, and I was actually blown away by my experience of studying science. And I could say, having done an undergraduate degree in science and a graduate degree in religious studies at Stanford, of all places, I can say that my science classes were more religious than my religious studies classes. My sense of awe and, you know, sense of the mystery and, you know, something just really something. I remember once in a botany class, Introduction to Botany, and there we were studying the carbon-oxygen, carbon dioxide, oxygen cycles.

There was this big, beautiful diagram on the chalkboard of how, you know, the plants produce oxygen, and human beings and animals and other places produce carbon dioxide, and we kind of—this big cycle goes round and round. And it was a pretty basic idea. But as I left the classroom out on the campus there, we had all these beautiful trees around me. And I stood there in awe of these trees, and a kind almost like a religious sense of awe where the sense of who I was, the boundaries of it, dissolved, because I sat there kind of contemplating that I needed the trees to produce oxygen more than I needed my eyes, more than I needed, you know, certainly one kidney, a lot of things that are very intimate and important, part of who I think I am. But I could more easily do without them than I could do without these plants, their producing oxygen.

And so I was wondering, Where do I begin? And where do I begin? And that was a sense of mystery, or that I had, Where do I begin? Where do I end if that’s, you know, if I’m so dependent on this external world? And then I remember also in—it was a new biology class—studying mitochondria, and it’s been thirty years since I studied the stuff. So I think that the biological knowledge in the last thirty years has probably multiplied in times all time before nineteen seventy-six. But in any case, I’m sure my knowledge might become dated.

But back then, the theory that was most active about mitochondria was that mitochondria

originally were single-celled animals or beings. They were distinct and independent, that somehow were absorbed into a bigger cell, and that as cellular life evolved and developed and eventually became complex animals, those mitochondria multiplied together with the cells and just came along for the ride. And mitochondria are very important because they're the energy powerhouse for cells, which starts on like a battery. And here the theory was that this essential battery for every single cell of a living being is a foreign object. As a foreign being, you know. You look around and you've a lot of cells in your body, and you know in every cell that you have there is another being in there. You know you've been possessed.

You know it is something, you know, that somehow has been absorbed and just travels along with you. That's how it's set up. I thought that was pretty amazing. Where do I begin? And where is it away? And who am I? Am I made up of two creatures, human beings and mitochondria? I think this kind of—as I don't know what it does for you—but I was kind of amazed by that. Where do I begin? Where do I end? Who am I?

And then, if you look at a—you know, get a little bit the physiology of a human being, and you realize that if you look inside of yourself, you're mostly made up of space. I don't know what they know. If you compress yourself, you take all the space away. Now, you probably—I don't know what size would you become. You know, I don't know. You'd probably be smaller than the period at the end of a sentence, probably less than that, right? If all the space goes away, we're mostly made up of space.

It's astounding how much space we're made up. So here I am, right? So what's that about space? And then there's—we're made up of water. Someone knows what percentage we're made up of water, what, seventy-two? She's seventy-two, and he's eighty per cent. Depends on ninety something, a lot. Hahahahaha, you know. And so we're made up of water, you know. A big chunk of who we are is water.

And this water has been a lot of—gets created here and there as we go along. But somebody, I imagine it's been cycling through this world for hundreds and thousands of many millions of years. And you know, the water we drink today probably has gone through and been passed through the bodies in some way or other of countless beings before us. And so even the water we make up, you know, is just recycled material. And then, you know, and besides our water, we're made up of other stuff. You know, carbon. We're carbon-based creatures.

And the carbon we're made up of is, you know, really recycled. You know, human beings are interrecycled material. That's what we do. We're, you know, we go out, look for material to recycle and recycle it again. That's all it is, you know. We're the origin, you know. If we're

unoriginal. But we've made up all this recycled materials stuff now, all this stuff—the material of our life, the material goods of our life that come together because we eat and cannot happen into our life. Is that who we are? Are we this material body? Are we this that passes through? And can we take it to be, “This is who I really am”? Do I find who I really am in the water? Seventy, eighty, ninety per cent we're water. Do we find it in the carbon? Do we find it in the magnesium? Do we find it in the potassium? Do we find it in the carbon and the inorganic compounds that make us up? You know, where is this? Who are we that? A lot of that's interchangeable. A lot of it we can do without, and some of it we can't.

So we don't find it necessarily there so easily. You don't find it in your name, I know. So obviously you cut or cut your hair off. Are you more or less sure who you really are? And then there's a—and then if you look more deeply besides the material being who we are. I'm astounded by some of the research being done about the brain and the nervous system and the chemicals that make it all go. Just this week I read a story about how the kind of intelligences of men and women, as a generalization, tend to be different depending on the presence and absence of certain hormones.

Especially an embryo gets kind of, you know, men get all this testosterone at an early age, but they're still an embryo. It creates a certain kind of intelligence. Apparently, spatial intelligence gets really strong under the influence of testosterone. And as a human being is an adult, parents, you can play with the hormone levels and can change intelligence, how the mind works and the brain works. And as my wife found out, she went through for three months medically induced temporary menopause, many years ago. And after a few months of that, she said, “These thoughts are not my thoughts.” Not that—I was pretty wise of her to see it that way. She didn't identify with them.

These thoughts are not my thoughts. And so, in a hormone or fluctuate and change, the chemical levels fluctuate and change, and they have a huge impact on what we think and what we believe. Certain kinds of psychological, unusual, original states of mind happen because not only do we have delusion, delusive thinking—what's going on—but there seem to be chemicals involved in convincing us that they're true, you know, not just simply that we think they're true. There's actually chemicals in it that kind of want us to believe certain things. One of the things that kind of ages who psychologists, or biologists have pointed out, is that one of the seemingly, for many people, one of the common delusions of human beings is that we think better of ourselves than we really are.

Now, I don't know how they got to that conclusion. Most people I know think they're worse

than they really are, but then it's a combination of that. But somehow there's this—we can delude ourselves, lie to ourselves, about all kinds of things about ourselves. And what's that based upon? And we start digging into the physiology and neurology of the brain. We find that there's all these influences of biology on how we think, and maybe even on what we believe, how our mind works, intelligences that we have, the processes, mental processes we do.

So do we find ourselves in that? If you take a new hormone and you start having new kinds of thoughts, is your thinking, you know? Well, yes, if you take chemicals, then if it takes some kind of hormones, of course, then the new thoughts are not you. The new thoughts are someone else's or something else, right? But the old thoughts, that's really who you are, right? Because the old hormones, they're accurate. The ones you kind of somehow came in, you know, just have that to call naturally, that's who you are.

So you don't have to go very far in the literature of neurobiology, of psychology, of sociology, of many different places to begin realizing that in the modern scientific world, the self as some kind of essential self begins disappearing. And I think that modern science has much better arguments or evidence for saying there is no self than Buddhism has, as they know, they found certain brain centers in the mind, the brain that seems to be the brain centers that even manufacture the sense of a self: "This is me. This is my self. This is mine." And if those are operating, then the sense, "This is mine," doesn't exist.

One of the things that I've read in a kind of this kind of study of neurobiology, some scientists will say that human beings exist in a very strong, interdependent world. We're dependent on our mothers. We're dependent on our parents, our families, our community, our society. There's a very strong level of dependence. And one of the functions of some of these hormones and brain part centers, whatever, is to create a sense of individual that's very distinct and separate. And so there's this kind of play between being dependent and being independent that seems to be built into some of the structures of the brain.

Does that mean that the structures of the brain are real? You know, the fact that the mind can create these things is constructed and created. Is it arbitrary? What is it? So I find that this—in the study of science, it becomes a cause—were weirder and weirder who we are or it becomes more and more mystery. Who are we? And what makes us tick, what makes us believe what we believe, what makes us have the feelings we have, the desires we have, the impulses we have? What's going on here? Who's in charge? Are your hormones in charge?

And probably a good percentage of you probably had times when your hormones were

clearly in charge, and later you realize, “Why? What was that about? I did things that I didn’t even want to do,” and so are those hormones really you or who are you in all that? I had the good fortune to have known—like us. Now I know five generations of Fronsdaal—I do know my father and now my grandfather, I knew my great-grandfather, and I know my sons also, but I do in the generations of myself. Going back to my great-grandfather, I see there’s certain personality traits that seem to be consistent, and I don’t know if they’re going traveling into my sons yet. But if those personality traits existed before me in this lineage, are they really who I am? Are they really who I am? Or are they, you know, what are they? Who am I? What are those things? Can I claim to be who I am? I don’t know. I just find, as I find all this, a mysterious who am I?

I think a reflection on oneself, like analysis in general, analyzing oneself, sometimes really interesting. A few weeks ago, I participated in a meeting where I had a little bit of strong words with someone, and there was a lot of inner processes going on in me in my decision to have these strong words with someone else. And because I was the unusual in that contact, I had these strong words. I spent a lot of time afterwards reflecting what was going on there for me. And it was very interesting for me to reflect, because the more I reflected what was going on, the more I started unpacking more and more was going on in that situation, more of my understanding, my views, my beliefs, my motivations, my intentions, my feelings, the background of what was going on over the last days.

The sense of the group, a sense the history of the group, my relation to the history of the group. It just got so amazingly full, rich. What was all going on in my choice to have these strong words with someone? And at the time, I had no idea it was so complex. But I took the time to think about it for some days—why, there’s a lot going on here. So where am I in that? Who am I? Who am I?

And as I think many of you know, in some spiritual traditions, a central question for the spiritual life, practice question, is the question, “Who am I? Who am I?” And just ask that over and over again. It’s, for some people, very profound to ask that. In the way that is most profound for me is not in getting an answer. Now I figured it out. I spent long enough for that answer, that question. Now I figured it out.

What I’ve found is most satisfying to me, that with the answers that come to me, are the answers when I realize, “I’m not this. I’m not this. I’m not that. I’m not that. I’m not that. I’m not that. I’m not that. I’m not that.” So what are you? What are you not? That’s an interesting question. So who are you? Or you can ask, Who are you not? And who are you really not?

So I sit down. I sit here in front of you, and you could ask me, “Who are you, Gil?” And I could say, “Oh, I’m a Dharma teacher.” Is that who I really am? It’s something. It’s a role that I’m playing now for all of you. And I go home, and let me tell you, if I take this role at home, my wife will say, “Gil, you’re using that tone of voice again,” so is a Dharma teaching Gil: Is that who I really am? So I don’t see that is who I really am.

Am I a father? Who is a husband? Am I a son? Is that who I really am, or are they more like clothes that I wear that sometimes are useful concepts, and sometimes get in the way? Am I not useful? Am I—what are—who am I really? Am I really a kind person? That I really am. I don’t—if I was kind when I had those strong words, that person, I know it. I’ve been burdened sometimes by thinking I need to be a kind person.

What a burden that is. So Who am I? I’d rather not see myself as a kind person. Even less, I know. Even less do I want to see myself as an unkind person. But I don’t know. I only deceive myself that way. I choose those concepts. I am my age. I’m fifty-one years old. Is that who I am?

I think the more—or the older I get, the less age has any meaning. To me, seems kind of an empty concept some way. Am I my gender? Does gender define who I really am? I know for some other people that is, but I don’t identify that strongly with gender. Seems to disappear plenty of times in plenty of situations. Doesn’t seem like something that is going to represent some essential aspect of who I am in my ethnicity. The ethical background doesn’t hold me very tightly.

I’m a Norwegian. I was born in Norway. I don’t quite identify as an American. I don’t quite identify as Norwegian. I don’t really care so much. I wish they had United Nations passports for everybody who wanted one. I would take that quickly. Am I my accomplishments in the past? I could wear my accomplishments like a badge, my latest one. You know, that book I translated, it published last year, a *Dhammapada*. I could like being put a poster up here behind you so that you really know that I’m somehow intimately and tightly connected to that piece of that accomplishment, so that every time you see me, you get down to your floor and you bow, and you just think that I’m really great.

You know, it’s really, you know, I don’t think I am. I do. I don’t identify very much with my accomplishments. A little bit brings me some joy, but that’s who I really am. My accomplishments, things I’ve done in the past? Am I my past experiences? When I travelled in France many years ago, some of the French people I encountered said, “The Americans are really strange. They seem to only want to talk about what they’ve done.” I don’t know if it’s true or



not, but that was the few people in anecdotal evidence, that few people I talked to that. The Americans like to talk about what they've done, their story, is no new—what they talk about in France otherwise. What else is there but the—you know, am I my story of my past, all my past experiences?

How quickly, you know, quickly some of us are—I can be it sometimes—to want to tell people of my own, let me tell you. But what I was in the past, what I did in the past, said, “Who I am?” Am I really what I'm going to be in the future? I think that a lot of things that people take as who they are, and if you really investigate carefully and really question, “Is this who I really am?” It begins to fall away. And Buddhist spirituality and other spiritualities, as well, very much involves this kind of shedding of identities of who we think we really are, which really, stage, in a way, are limiting us, self-limiting.

And I think it's pretty easy to see other people who limit themselves by how, by their identity. Someone who thinks, “You know, Oh, I'm not good enough. I'm not worthy. I couldn't do that.” And you see, you see how ridiculous it is. And how could they limit themselves so much that way? You know you're good enough. You could do it. Don't burden yourself with that kind of limitation in its a view of who they are.

Or sometimes people put you in a category. I know sometimes spouses can be seen sometimes through the eyes, through the perspective of their other spouse. You know, you don't seem to exist at all. But it's because you are your spouse that they see you are your so-and-so's husband or so-and-so's wife. And it feels kind of yucky to be seen only that way. You know, you know, I'm here. You know, I'm not just a wife or husband. You know, no, I'm who I am. Don't limit me. Don't keep me bound by that.

Or once upon a time you had angry words with someone. It doesn't happen that often. Once and from then on the person thinks of you as an angry person. Please, don't you limit me that way? Don't hold me in that box. I'm more than that. What's hardest to see? So it's easy to see when other people do it. It's easy to see when people do it towards us. What's most difficult to see is when we do it towards ourselves.

We limit ourselves. But one of the clues that we do this is that we suffer. If we feel unhappy, or feel dissatisfaction, or feel pressure, or feel oppressed, or feel held back or weighed down, all those are kind of symptoms. Can be symptoms of the limitation of self-concept and self-ideas, and the shedding of identity, shedding all these things. “This is who I really am” kind of ideas—shedding. Some people will say, I see it as being a diminishing of the self, that I'm less and less. I'm not really here. Other people will see it as being an expansion of the self,

because there's nothing that stands in the way. There's no boundaries to who we are. It's like being, you know, in a whole series of concentric boxes.

And now somehow you begin shedding the boxes from the inside out, and you get more and more and more space as you kind of shed those limiting constructs that hold us in. Eventually the last box gets taken, gets open, and you realize there's an infinite space all around you. It's great. So I believe that there are times, many people have intimations of a shift of identity or shedding of identity. For some people, can be spending a lot of time in nature can do it. Some people—back in the old days I used to be—taking drugs. I don't know what—nowadays people don't tell me any more what they do. But back when I was young, people took a lot of drugs. It was a big shift of identity that happened with us. And sometimes a childbirth can be a huge shift of identity. It's a very powerful shedding of a lot of stuff.

I've known a lot of parents now, since now I'm a parent, and it's really amazing how parenting causes one to shed a lot of identity. Old identities, you have time for it. So there are certain things in life that can cause that shift, sometimes temporary shifts. When we get an intimation or intuition of something is different than the usual constricted ways in which we hold ourselves and see ourselves, and then the question is, How do I live into some more? Well, have to be careful what I say.

So I could say into more expanded sense of self, or unlimited sense of self, or a freed sense of self. The technically correct Buddhist thing to say is to say something like, How do I live into a freedom from the limitations of selves, freedom from the limitations of self-concept? And the reason why that's technically correct is the first way, say, "How do I live into an expanded sense of self?" leaves you with an idea of who you are. "I'm an extended sense of self. That's who I am." But the Buddhist way of looking at this is mostly negative, wording it negatively, focusing on what's absent, freeing ourselves. So just to talk about the freedom from the limiting concepts and attachments to self and what we are.

And what happens once we're free from these limitations? The Buddha preferred not to say. Is that very satisfying? So here he said to these aristocrats, "What would you rather find, the woman or yourself?" And then the Buddha offers a path of practice that involves the shedding of a lot of identity, seeing through, penetrating through the construction. And then, in the end, you don't find anything to hold on to. So, "Cool! Now, false advertisement at the beginning."

So how to be in, to be free from all this stuff. So people have some intimation sometimes of the possibility of a shift of identity, or change of identity, or shedding of identity. And

one other way than to live into that is through meditation practice, and meditation practice, the calming of the meditation, calming of that activity of the mind that's making up self, the insight of meditation. We actually can see through and understand what's going on, understand how it's constructed, how it's created, to penetrate through and through the veils of it is a very powerful process. And what you're trying to do in meditation, deep in a deep Buddhist meditation practice, is to kind of shed the veils of selfing enough that you get down and start seeing the very beginnings of it.

What prompts it in the first place? What is the inner motivation? What is the inner prompt for trying to create a sense of self, hold on to a sense of self with some attachment? What's the prompt that wants to cling to self-concepts and ideas? And then the idea is to see that initial early prompt, and then find some way to relax that. And when you relax that, what happens? So last week, if you remember last week, those of you who came, I talked about the three kinds of clingings that have to do with me, mine, and my selfing.

Remember that me, myself, mine, that activity. And the Buddha said something very interesting to someone. He said, "There is this activity where the mind constructs a sense of possessiveness. There is this activity where the mind creates concepts about who I am. There is this activity where the mind creates some views about who I essentially am in my essence. These activities of the mind go on. They are all activities of the mind. But if you look through the activity to the ground from which that activity arises, from the object, from the brain or the mind, or the inner place, the mind that creates that activity. And if you can see that the ground out of which it arises is not self, is not mine and not the self, then you are freed from the activity." That makes sense.

So if you understand that—to say it maybe very crudely—to say that the deep inner process or the inner machine, the inner that it bubbles from, out of which bubbles up the idea, "Oh, this is who I really am." If that inner process that bubbles up, "Ah, this is who I really am," that inner process is seen as being not self, then whatever thoughts that process creates are seen through and penetrated. So to drop below the level of our thoughts, and what is there in our brain, our mind, in our hearts.

Last thing I'll say is that in Buddhism, all this, all this discussion like this is not a kind of idle philosophy or, you know, cute philosophy or something, but it's really part of the pointing to the possibility of setting the heart at peace, to discover the deepest levels of peace, well-being, and happiness that's possible for a human being. That can happen when we've shed all of the unnecessary false attachments to self that kind of agitate the heart and disturb the

deep inner peace that's there. How many times can I say this is the last thing I'm going to say? What I have tried to do this evening carefully—not that carefully. But maybe you might not have heard what I didn't say. But what I did say, I said nothing but that. I made no claim that the Buddha taught that there is no self. I didn't say that. What I said is that this is not self. This is not self. This is not self. This is not self. All these things, you can find all these things and say, I question, "Is this self?" No, that's not self. This is not self. This is not self. But I didn't say that there is no self. Is that interesting? So now I will stop and let that hang for the week moment. You're interested in this topic some more.

Then I'll continue with this next week. Thank you.