

# 2010-10-04 The Buddhas Teaching On Self And Not Self

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

buddha, people, atman, teaching, attā, impermanent, perception, called, searching, permanent, idea, disenchanted, philosophical, liberated, english, son, talking, consciousness, find, experience, anattā

## SPEAKERS

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It's been a few weeks since I've been here. But when I was here the last weeks I was here, I did a series of talks having to do with the Buddhist teachings and practices around self and self thing. And it's a teaching which is considered a very significant in Buddhism, the teaching of not self. But even more important is the teaching i think is a teaching around how we get attached to self and how we create a sense of self. And the invites more significant is that if we look at the teaching of not self, it's easy to get wrapped up and confused and tighten the knot around. Well, what are these Buddhists mean? Obviously, there's a self here. That's how I got IMC. The self brought me here I brought the cell or something. And it doesn't make sense to talk about not self But if we talk about how we get attached to self, and how we get self conscious, self preoccupied selfish, that gets, you know, that's much more you can relate to that. And then as we begin to dissolve some of the self attachments, and then there can be very radically different experience of being a self or being being being being alive. That sometimes in Buddhism is called an experience of not self or understanding of not self. But even so, the teachings are not self self, not self is confusing. And one of the reasons it's confusing is the philosophical reasons. And there's a kind of the philosophy of self and the logic around Is there a self is there, not a self. And most people gravitate in that direction, as opposed to the experiential or psychological aspect of self, you know, how we actually experience itself, and how we construct the self and how we get attached to it. So this divide between what I'm calling here philosophical and experiential And so people tend to get too wrapped up around the philosophical they get to court or get caught by that. And so I wanted to address this aspect directly today. And then end with a little pointing to the more experiential. And now the philosophical side, it's very confusing to use the English word self, the Buddhist teacher that teaches as teaching of not self. Because the teaching of self is not a very well defined term in English, we think we know we're talking about but as a philosophical term, or as a kind of metaphysical term as like, you know, it's not a very precise term, you know, what these ask the question what is the self you know, who you are as a self. If you say your name, he raised him a call out your name, you respond, but you know, what is the self? What is the essential self, the true self would that that's, you know, You start asking questions like that it lends itself to a lot of different possible answers. In fact, in English, we have a lot of different definitions of what it means to use the word self. And if you go if those of you who studied psychology, different schools of psychology, each School of Psychology and some of them have different definitions of what it means to have a self or what it means to be yourself, and what it means to develop a strong self for all kinds of things. And so and so if we use the word self without defining the terms, then it's very easy to miss each Miss ourselves. So if you're, you know, you know, we don't know what we think we're talking about the same thing, but we're actually not. So you know, the Buddhists might say, it's important to have the experience of not self but what I've spent countless thousands of dollars my therapist to develop a strong sense of self. That's

what we're developing and working here. You know, if I wasted my money, and what's this about now I have to undo it. And perhaps we're talking about the self from different definitions of it different understandings of what it means. I'd like to propose that often the word self is a the self is an abstract category within which different understandings, definitions, qualities are included. So, whenever someone says there is no self or there is a not self, you have to ask, Well, what do you mean by self? That makes sense? So, if you go back to 2500 years ago, in ancient India, the Buddha had this teaching that gets translated into English as a teaching of not self, but he didn't use the English word self. Right? And, and just as a footnote, just like Freud did not use the word ego. That's the English translation of the German word for I write, they die.

And so Somehow these people translated Freud into English chose the word ego. And then because of Freud the word ego has become very important in the English language. Did you know just because of Freud translation issue and Freud, I think I talked about that a few weeks ago. So the Buddha didn't speak English as far as we know. And he did not grow up in a Western American culture that has a particular cultural definitions or idea of what it means to be a self. So, he probably was not referring to, to modern ideas of self and he might not have known anything about Freud. So in his cultural context, in his time in place, the word is being translated itself. What's it being, what's it referring to? What does it mean? And the word in Pali is attā, a.t.t.a. Some of you who know a little about Hinduism or heard the expression Atman so it's the same word Sanskrit is Atman. And in Pali it's attā. So you know the Mahatma Gandhi, Maha Atman, the great self, it's kind of it's a, it's literally means said very staid, very fast Maha Atman Mahatma Gandhi. And so, the Buddha has a teaching of not attā. So and then it was a very important for him the is called an attā is not so or on is not an anattā is not attā. So what is attā? How did the Buddha understand what attā is? There was a wonderful Burmese Buddhist monk who taught here in the Bay Area for about 25 years, named U Sayadaw Ananda He lived in San Francisco for a long time. Then he had live in the monastery, Burmese monastery and halfmoon Bay. Beautiful man very well educated as a Buddhist monk scholar, kind of monk practitioner monk. And he, I'm sure I wouldn't I suspect that he could speak English better than I could speak it. He grew up in English speaking schools in Burma and very well educated. And he wrote a pamphlet on this teachings of anattā in English, and lo and behold, he did not translate the word author, as self. He translated as soul and not so teaching as opposed to not self. As soon as you say, not soul as opposed to not self, you're in a whole different conversation. What do you mean there's no self? that's confusing to me. But you say nuts, nuts, no. So then you get into more interesting kind of, you know, Behind everyman soul, and a Buddhist you know, I don't usually use that, you know, you might think I don't, that's not something I think about like God, you know their soul. What does that mean? So, he talks about nuts you know, so useful and under translated as not soul. So I mentioned that to kind of to open up like what do you mean what are these Buddhists mean by the Buddha mean chances are the Buddha was responding to the philosophical religious ideas of his time, that refer to the concept of Atman of utter. That was the idea that any human being there is some kind of essence, permanent essence that like little small little seed perhaps, or something, and that one of the goals of religious life is to realize that that essence was the same as Brahma, and Brahma is a great, you know, it's hard to know but the great cosmic God, the Creator God, the great cosmic principle, the great ultimate reality. And to realize that the Atman was the same as the Brahma that the little essence that you have is the same as ultimate reality was the goal of certain forms of religion time of the Buddha. And so people try to do that try to find the outcome and they tried to discover it described how to start discover how to have union between the Atman and the Brahma, and it was a big pursuit.

So what did what and how do people understand this? You know, really what what people understand what it was the Buddha referring to when he used the term attā. He did not define it directly. So we don't know. However, there's a beautiful discourse of the Buddha gave where you can as he gives his

teachings, you can from it, you can tease out what he what he has He understood what the attā is, because you've you're already getting bored. Hang in there, because we will get to the experiential side of all this. I think it will. It will. It'll at least tantalize you awake. So this is a discourse teaching the Buddha gave to his own son. And many people don't realize that Buddha had a son. And the Buddha my son was relatively young. He joined his father as a Buddhist monk, actually very young. He was a novice monk because you can only be ordained as a as a full monk when you're about 20 years old, as an adult, and so he spent many years growing up under his father's tutelage. And then the tradition says that when his son was about 20 years old The Buddha gave him this teaching. And as this so kind of taught me it's kind of touching. I'm a father with sons. And, you know, how do you teach your children? How do you pass it on? How does a great spiritual teacher as a child, how do you relate to your children around your teachings you have to do, how do you train them. And so, it seems that when his son Rahula, was about 20, the Buddha determined that his son was now ready for the most profound teaching he had to give teachings that would help liberate him from his deepest attachments from his clinging from his back, which keeps the heart and mind constricted or tight or in bondage. So, the Buddha went to his son and he said, Come with me. We're going to go for Walk deep into the woods to a grow that was called the blind man's growth. I don't know why it was called that but it was called. It was already living kind of in the edge of kind of urban area in the woods in the forest. But he went skiing that day he was going to take go deeper into the woods with a son and then we're going to spend the day in the woods together. Again, a little bit touched area father and son going off in the woods together and the nature going for a walk. So he said Bring your sitting cloth because what they do they when they monks sit, they have this square piece of cloth they put in the ground to keep stay clean, I guess. So they went into the woods and they came to blind man's growth and, and somebody groves in India are quite beautiful. I don't know exactly what trees they had here. But in that area of India they had this majestic tree called the Sala which is kind of like the redwoods of India beautiful big majestic trees and And they have these beautiful cover the corner they're called these you know, when the roots are high off the ground, they come down and make these kind of walls. Daniel not the hanging banyans but you know, they make roots come out and make this kind of, they call Banyan kind of bottoms and make these kind of like sections around you. And so it's easy for me at least imagine them sitting this beautiful grove of trees, majestic big trees and very quiet place in nature. And that the juxtaposition of the teaching that you're about to hear in this natural setting, highlight something or make something more accessible. Certain things about certainly about the self of who you are changes, whether you live a busy urban life running around, or whether you're deep up in this year as in Redwood country, and by yourself sitting there, you know, beautiful trees and, and so many ways in which you usually think about yourself seem irrelevant. Up there to me Change your sense of self kind of changed in some way. So here they were in a setting like that. And, and then the Buddha engages his son with not teaching him directly, but by engaging him in a question and answer process. And inquiring with him asking you questions kind of help him kind of find his way to some kind of deeper understanding. So, he would have said, Rahula What do you think?

Is the attā permanent or impermanent? So your eye, your physical eye? Is it permanent and permanent? And the answer that they Rahula gave was it's impermanent. It's not gonna be there forever. Maybe it'll be there, you know, there until he dies. But sometimes people lose their eyes. As I said before that those of us who have glasses, realize that that is not a permanent fixed thing, but it's changing quite a bit and over a lifetime. So it's impermanent, a changing thing. And then the Buddha says is what is impermanent. It's a translation here is suffering or happiness, stress or bliss. And Rahula says, Well, whatever is impermanent is suffering, whatever is impermanent is stressful. So certainly I can tell you that there's certain kind of stress with having poor eyesight. I mean, if I take my eyes, my glasses off, it's pretty stressful. I know. You know, you know, I'd have to strain to you know, you see this blur of, you know, I can kind of tell us people out there but, you know, I can't tell gender,

you know, anything. So if I didn't have glasses, it would be stressful for me and be hard for me to get around. be hard for me to Do ordinary things in life. So for whatever reason, he says it's suffering. And then he says is what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, fit to be regarded as follows. This is mine, this I am, this is my attā, this is myself in this translation. And Rahula says no. So here the idea is that I think the assumption is that it can only it only makes sense to call something mine, if you have some control over it, so mastery over it, some authority, some ability to engage and change it. You know, I don't get near sighted if I told myself that when I was 10 years old, you know, that I could it was mine, but I don't have any control over it. And I remember how surprised I was I've had glasses for most of my life. But then about 10 years ago, I was went to supermarket and looked at a bottle that had very small little words on it. And for the first time, I couldn't read it. And you know what? So not only was I nearsighted, but now I'm getting this kind of you know, you know all day gize too. So, now I have to have you know, bifocal glasses, so, I can see close up and far away and everywhere in between. So that, so that Rahula says no, and this is the answer The Buddha was hoping for, whether you agree with this or not, this is a reverse way if you reverse engineer this question, this is what the how the Buddha was defining or understanding what this the attā is, the attā is meant to be something which is permanent, is meant to be something which is blissful and it's meant to be something we You have some control over ability to Rector have to savor what it does. It's an absolute way. And so that was the you know the idea of a soul or this essence. And so you find in some schools of Indian religion, the idea of set chit Ananda sought is usually truth or being or what's real. shift is mind and anon does bliss. So, truth, truth, truth, mind or truth, consciousness and bliss, that somehow the deepest experience comes with experience of consciousness or self or essence, being blissful. And then we have some control over to the cadets. So for the Buddha the idea of the soul that he was countering with it was that idea that there is a soul mate you know, a soul or an essence which is permanent. Which is in its essence, blissful, in which we have some control or say over some part you're following.

So, when the Buddha said that, that the body is not self, feelings are not self perceptions are not self, mental formations and activity is not self and consciousness, not self. What he was meaning was that the body doesn't qualify as this is essence that's permanent, blissful. And that's something you can have absolute control over neither so the same thing for feelings, perceptions, all your mental activities and thoughts and consciousness. So, you know, maybe you don't agree with that but if you look at any of those categories, it's hard to see you know how they're going to be permanently, how they're permanent because thoughts feelings, perceptions, even consciousness when you pay careful attention arising and passing it's hard to find is being permanently blissful. It's just that's part of the change nothing stays the same. And it's hard to see that you have any real mastery or control over body feelings, perceptions, thoughts, mental formations, consciousness and these things. So those standard was kind of common ways of understanding ourselves don't qualify as the other. So then you could say, well, that's okay. Because I know that separate from that there's a in the essence of my being there is this I know there's this essence there's a soul I just know it. How do you know it just feels like it's there. Is our feelings, permanent? Our feelings, blissful feelings. You know something you have real control over. You know where our feelings you know, just feeling they come and go. You can feel all kinds of things. And the scriptures tell me Well, you know what scriptures who wrote the scriptures? And you start to ask me what you know. So if you if you can't find the author, the soul, in your direct experience, where do you find it? And how do you know you have it? So the Buddha was then asking his son in your direct experience, can you find it of categories of direct experience? So, if you look systematically through everything you can experience directly and leave nothing out everything that can be known directly in your experience directly, not by logic, not by scripture, not by someone told you not by just feels like right, or inference. And all the things you can directly experience, you find anything there that's permanent, that's permanently blissful, and that you have absolute sovereignty. control over you have actually say what actually happens to it, you know? So in Rome and Rahula said, No. So the way

the Buddha did that he went through these different categories. So first he said the eye, and then he said, forms the shapes that the eye sees. Are they permanent? Are they blissful? And you have absolute control over the forms that you see things you see out in the world. And then the eye contact, the act of eye perception. The way that we perceive there's the eye, there's the object, and there's perception of it. Is the perception, the perception is there? Is there permanence and the perception, is there some kind of abiding bliss? In the perception Do you have absolute control over the perception? And now that we know how complicated perception is, it's hard to say that there's even pure perception and mediated by conditioning and all kinds of things that go on. And so Rahula said no. So good at first he went through I mean the same thing he did Same thing for ears, ears, sounds, and the perception of hearing. And he did it for the nose for the tongue for the body. And he also did it for the mind. And doing this, the Buddha was trying to point out all possible realms of how we can know something directly through what the Buddhists call the six senses. you following me? So outside of those six senses, how are you going to know anything directly? What's, what's accessible to you? And if everything you can experience directly has these three qualities, then it cannot be the author, the Ottoman that people believed in back in those times. You follow?

So, so Rahula, followed by Rahula. Remember, he'd been monastic for many years, probably. We've done a lot of meditation. very still. Very quiet, I've learned to let go of a lot of things was probably not attached to a lot. And somehow when mine is very still very relaxed, very free, relatively free, it can still be a lingering kind of sense or feeling or attachment to some abiding essence and providing true being this is where I really am, or there is something here. And, and so the Buddha here was kind of giving him a guided meditation, where they were hula is kind of looking for all the realms of experience, you find anything which is my essence. And when he went through all the experience, he couldn't find anything. Then there's a shift that happened Rahula mind and the shift was here, it's described this way. But actually, they actually the Buddha, the Buddha describes a shift that I guess he was hoping Rahula would have. Seeing in this way. A person becomes distant charmed with the eye, disenchanted with objects you can see disenchanted with eye perception, eye consciousness and disenchanted and then disenchanted with feelings, perceptions, mental activities and consciousness that arise with eye contact as a condition. So you start getting disenchanted with all the different things you can know directly support the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind. disenchanted means

they break your spell is broken. The feeling of Buddhism is that most people live under a spell where they assign promise to things in the world that aren't really there. They're kind of enamored they're enchanted. There is no magic spells. have things and we have a whole industry advertising industry in the United States. That's that's really capitalizes literally on getting people enchanted. Believing that you know, you get the ads right that you get by this toothpick to this toothpick, you will have all the sexual adventures you'd ever want in your life. You look really wonderful and you know, profound. And you're getting charmed without too thick. It's got to do with everything, everything you need for you. And so, but they did being chant and charmed that something is going to provide you with a true abiding security, safety, guarantee religious ultimate reality, spiritual salvation. We have all these things we invest in and we get the numbered in it. An important part of Buddhism is to get disenchanted break the spell, break the trance that people often fall into. So here with doing this kind of search, looking deeply at everything, directly experience Then the Buddhist said, then a person starts becoming disenchanted as a person becomes disenchanted

but that's all he says, Here is this this, this discourse, that's all he says. And, and then it goes on very simply and says that Rahula when he heard this teaching, his mind was liberated by no longer clinging to anything. So it's a beautiful story, I think, you know, again of a father, giving this wonderful gift to a son, helping us on becoming liberated. So here we see this philosophical side, what the Buddha was



referring to, was a very particular idea of self. One that people were attached to are concerned where they're trying to organize their life around. So if you to quickly easily translate the words attā into the English word self, then we have a whole different associations with the word self than what the Buddha was referring to. Before that, and so it's confusing for us, you know, the Buddha said, there's no self, you know, but maybe he wasn't meaning our sense of self. It happens. But it happens. I think relatively, it's interesting that it does translate a little bit in the sense that the same principles apply to the degree to which we get, we look at any concept of self as being something that's permanent. That's something that is going to provide us with lasting happiness are something that we have some kind of absolute control over. those beliefs might be a source of suffering and people. And when those beliefs can be loosened up like nothing, then we started to cling to those beliefs around self, then there's certain kind of liberation that can come whereas attached to our ideas, of self as perhaps the age some of the ancient Indians were to their idea, bata we just have our own. So it's a little bit you know, teachings of not self that Buddha gave still kind of work. But it's a little bit complex because of the different reference points. Makes sense. So I know this is kind of dry stuff, philosophy, but now you probably hopefully never forget, and, and be a little bit wiser when you hear Buddhist teachers quoting the Buddha. Because it's too bit too easy for teachers to kind of do it kind of gloss over these differences or the be sensitive enough these cultural or religious distinctions that go on, and I'm as guilty as anybody. So that was the philosophical side. And now I want to do the experiential side that maybe will tantalize you or liberate you or annoy you and then something else talk yesterday for those of you who are here I apologize did it again. So say you're with a friend in a really silent place. Maybe you're in the redwoods beautiful place. It's really silent. This still amazingly still never been such a pristine, beautiful, refreshing place of stillness of silence. Just feel so good. Like finally the refrigerator turned off. Just in case you didn't realize you can still get in the freezer, it goes up, hunger stops and it's really quiet.

And then you say to your friend I can't believe it's so silent. Is it really that silent? There must be some noise here. And guess what? As you say it, you've made it. As you say, there's some noise here, there is some noise here is your voice. And then you go on and say, you know, I don't really believe in silence. Silence has no purpose and there's not really any silence at all and, and, you know, I've been looking for silence and thinking about and talking about it and, and, you know, wondering what the nature of silence and I keep looking and listening and talking and, you know, I just find any silence, you know, just like just all the noise people are always talking and I don't believe in it's absolutely not possible because, you know, you probably your friend will leave you but, but the very search for silence by speaking is impossible because as you keep speaking it kind of Takes a silence away. We talk to ourselves all the time. I mean, most of us do. I don't know about you, but not all of you. But I don't want to speak for you. But I suspect that you know, a good percentage of the people here are constantly chattering in their, in your mind, thoughts, images, ideas kind of going on and on. And it's kind of like a noise. And that the thinking that we have in our minds isn't often just neutral, quiet, relaxed thinking. It's often driven. There's compulsion, there's tension, there's pressure, there's agendas, there's fears, there's, you know, a lot of things that go on there. And sometimes they're searching for something. People who are in spiritual quests or in quest or searching for something. And so their mind is the mind maybe the thinking mind for now is searching is looking. But if you're always thinking if you're always thinking, these words in your mind, if you're always searching, looking looking Then there's something which is not available to you. Just as much the silent silence is not available to the person is constantly talking. If you're thinking about a place, so if you're thinking, where's the true self? Who am I really, I have to find myself I have to know myself. Let me try to analyze who I am. Let me try to remember all the stories of my life, because that will tell me who I am. Let me try to understand how I am with other people. Let me try to you know, search let's find the self Who am I right? And you're constantly engaged. What you what you're learning things you'll notice is that what's always there is this thinking searching, pressure or tension, this movement kognito ergo sum, which is, I think, therefore, I am so

Oh, so therefore, the true self, who I really am, must be found in the searching into thinking in the consciousness that's kind of directed looking out, because that's all there is. And that's all there is, but it's always going on. But what if it's just like the silence. As long as you're talking, you can't know the silence. As long as you're thinking or searching for who you are, you can find it because it's not found in thoughts or in searching or efforts of the mind to look anywhere. The very idea of looking someplace that very effort gives birth to a certain kind of activity, or it isn't an activity that gives you a location or a place to be. And so it feels very intuitive then, or I'm here because I kind of felt sense of being here. Just as if I tighten my fist, I feel the tightness, the pressure, the hardness, the pain. And I said, Oh, now I really know there's a hand because of the tension. My true hand isn't the tension. But if I release the tension, I won't feel my hand. But then have a more useful hand. If there's this very even very subtle tension in the mind. That tension can be confused for who we really are. But the tension is not required. And occasionally, the tension in the mind disappears entirely. But then after that tension gone. If you then say, well, who's the true self? Who am I really? Guess what?

You've added this noise, you added this activity, this pressure, that in a way is kind of both self defeating and gives you the wrong impression. It gives you idea Oh, there is this thing here. The talkers yourself. But what happens if you stop searching, stop thinking and allow the silence the stillness just to be there. If you allow awareness, to operate, to be able to be aware, without doing anything with awareness without directing it without the mental activity that that refers back to me, I'm the one who's experiencing something. I'm the one who's aware. Because it's a mental activity that says, I'm the one who's aware. It's very, and many times it operates in such a subtle level that we don't even know we're thinking that we're still an activity. I'm here and you're there. When that activity is put to rest, and there's only awareness in the Buddhist tradition says that there is no location for that awareness. It's not localized, because to be localized, there has to be that little pressure or attention or activity, of selfing. of thinking of searching, of referring of orienting oneself or finding oneself in relationship to things. And that activity of selfing is optional. Doesn't have to be operating most for most people's operating all the time. So, when the selfing stops, and we allow ourselves just to be aware, without any reaction to an experience without any putting any definition or labels in our experience without defining ourselves in relationship to the experience, just having the experience then there is no location For awareness, if there's no location for awareness, then there's no you. In that experience, if there's no you here, then there's no there. There's no here nor there or anything in between. and then the Buddha said, and just that window here nor there anything in between, without any location, just there is where we find the real full liberation from suffering from freedom. So this points back to this idea of who are we classic question, important question. And it says something about what we might or might not find, find, if we keep searching or what we might find if we start Searching. And the Buddhist says at some point, you have to stop searching to allow something totally different than happen than the usual ways in which we understand ourselves in the world. And it's such a place where it doesn't make sense to say anything about self. Because to say something about self to make any statements about the self, is just kind of is besides the point. No, no sense of self, no idea of self, no construction of self happens in that open awareness. If you come out of that open awareness and say, well, that open awareness, the self that doesn't really make sense. They're just awareness. What does it take to experience open liberated free awareness, without definition without fear without desire Without compulsion, generally takes a lot of effort, a lot of time and practice and a lot of relaxation. So, I hope that this complicated discussion about the philosophy of attā, early Buddhism, one way or other will encourage you to relax at least to relax around this Buddhist teaching of self and not self. There was one of the monks came to the office one day and said, This Buddhist teachings of not self we don't understand it.

And the abbot said, Yes, it's true. The teachings are not self is quite challenging. until you realize there's no self who's challenged. Thank you