

# 2010-10-11 The True Self

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people, abbess, identities, activity, question, dishwasher, zen, disappear, sweeping, idea, person, role, monk, meditation, monastery, buddhism, true, work, buddha, discover

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Okay, now

I have two things I wanted to do this evening in terms of the Dharma talk. One is to continue a little bit the series that I've been giving the last Monday's, that I've been here on the Buddhist teachings on self and non self. And it's such a rich topic and the idea of who we are is such a rich and multi dimensional issue, that it's worth looking at from many different perspectives. And depending on perspective, you look at it you get a little different answer a different perspective. And so I wanted to say a few more things around this topic. And then I wanted to leave hopefully enough time to hear your questions and hear much more from you. Some of you been coming on these Mondays. And perhaps by now you're have all kinds of questions, protests. concerns that you'd like to raise, so consider considering this This topic we've been covering all these weeks. So hopefully that's okay with you. So, I want to start reading a story from my new book. It's called the monastery within. And it's a story titled The true self. So here you're going to finally find out what the true self is waiting for a long time for this. A woman came to the monastery determined to ask the Abbess, how she could how she could discover her true self. He had assumed many identities over her lifetime, most of them identities others had expected her to have. When she presented her concern, the Abbess replied. Since knowing the true self is so important for you, you should ask it, you should ask this question of someone who has full penetrated this issue. We have a very learned monk here, who has read every Buddhist scripture and the many commentaries. He's studied with some of the greatest Buddhist teachers of this age. He has spent years meditating and has deep realization. Come, I will introduce you to him. The Abbess led the woman into the courtyard, where a solitary monk was absorbed in sweeping. That is him, whisper the Abbess. When you're interested in the true self, it's important not to be abstract. Don't ask what the true self is. Ask him what his true self is. shyly, but with great hope. The woman walked up to the monk and asked, What is your true self. The monk smiled and continued to sweep Going back to the Ibis, the woman said, he didn't answer my question. Quite the opposite, replied Davis. He gave you the most precise answer he could at this time when he sweeps his true self is the sweeping. So, is that a satisfying answer?

No.

Who are you? And you discover who you are in what you do? Or do you discover who you are in the abstract? You read a book on philosophy they'll tell you who you really are for your Teresa's to selfish don't know, I know. I get to carry the book with you for reference in case you forget. And or do you have some deep insight one day and then you carry that insight with you in your back pocket. Remind you and I know who I am. Who are you? And this kind of answer that the story gives is like an answer. That's the kind of answer. It's often given in Zen. Where you kind of you become one with the activity

you're in or you discover who you are in the activity that you're engaged in. And so it's never an abstract question. It's, it's just, it's a reveal to you, in what you do and how you do it, and how you engage in the world who you're with. It's not uncommon in Zen as well. If, like, sometimes they have occasionally they have like this very intense one on one private meeting with a Zen master. And, and they admit that master Mike, look at you, you sit there and great, strong stability and ask you, who are you or something? And there's many ways of answering that successfully. A number of ways. But one way that's sometimes successful, semi successful is to say something like you. You're sitting there and you're looking at that person, you're kind of in some ways you are that person in a certain kind of way. And then when you kind of disappear, not that you're not that you're, you know, you emerge in some neurotic way with the person you're sitting with, but that person just stands out and highlight and your self consciousness disappears. And there's some kind of tremendous intimacy and presence and connection with a person there, or with a sweet thing, or with the food that you eat, or with the tree that you see in your garden. There's some way in which the, the boundaries between self and the thing disappear. And the sense of me being here, disappears as well. There's a beautiful poem by oulipo, Chinese poet that says, forget it right now, but go something like very approximate Sitting solitary up in the mountains, the birds disappear in the sky, the clouds get thinner and thinner. Finally, all there's left is the mountain and me. And then there's just a mountain. So the symbolism is at the cloud, the birds and the birds and the sky, the clouds in the sky, are often symbolic for the busyness of the mind, the thoughts of the occupations of the mind. And when the mind stops being preoccupied with things and concerns with the world and thinking gets thinner and thinner clouds being like thinking, then at some point, it's just you're just really present in a very full way. You're really there with whatever's going on. And yours, he's sitting in the mountains, so it's just him and the mountain being there. But at some point, the cloud, the wisp of thought that identifies you, as You also fades away, because that's an activity the mind makes the mind thinks I'm here, who are you and you're not telling yourself who you are, who are you when you don't have any thoughts about who you are. So it's an activity and when that the mind gets calm and quiet enough the activity of creating a self being a self disappears. And what's left is the mountain. And the very kind of state of simplicity. So here in this story, they talk about, you know, becoming the sweet thing. You discover who you are, there's something very, I think, significant by discovering something about yourself in what you do. When I was in a Zen monastery, I was we were assigned to different jobs often. And like every three months, you were assigned a different job. And so I was there for three years. So I made jobs. I wasn't everything didn't rotate every three months, but sometimes you could. But I probably had, you know, five different jobs. There was not a lot of job stability. And, and what I loved about it was that I had more careers in the monastery than most people have in a lifetime. And what it meant was that in each each career, each kind of job I was assigned to

challenge me in different ways, called on different capacities that I have. And, and in the process of that I discovered different things about myself. If I had just kind of settled in being the cook, or settled in being the guest manager or sales, settling in being kind of the general labor pool that went around and just did little projects, handymen kind of projects, I would have, you know, I would have gotten good at that particular activity perhaps, but pretty pretty soon the kind of personal learning personal challenges that that Job had, would have stopped perhaps, and by you know, so like I was for a while I was number one Chief dishwasher for a while that was one job for three months. I loved it. And, and it was wonderful activity. I should have gotten my Zen certificate and Zen training in dishwashing, you know what? Who were Who are you? The dishes. I love the I've just completely absorbed. I was young, I was energetic. I was just kind of beautiful dance and dishwashing shed, you know, dancing, moving spinning around with the plates and the cups and silverware and you know, it can't all the dishes came so fast, had to work really, really hard and fast. It wasn't like the slow mindful. It was fast mindful. So that was great. And then just but I thought it was mastering the wonderful art of dishwashing. They

assigned me to the kitchen and I didn't know anything about cooking. So that was a big challenge for me. And so then I was there for three months. And it's also quite lovely. many ways, being a kind of prep cook kind of And then I don't know why they thought of it. But after those three months, they decided to make me the kitchen manager. And I'd never managed people in my life. And so suddenly, I wasn't being able to cook so much. I had to deal with people. And I thought the kitchen was a harmonious place. Well, it was just me and the carrots. But once I was manager, I got to see there was a lot more going on in a Zen kitchen than you know, you would think it's one of the most tense places in the monastery. It's like a pressure cooker. And I remember telling someone you know, I think those because in Zen everything has to be choreographed and the ether your special way and little bowls and I told her, those those cucumbers your cutting needs to be smaller to fit in the bowls that people eat out of these teeny little bowls. And she started crying. Someone else somebody else told me that says girl, I need to talk to you. Okay, so we went outside, and he looked at me and glared at me and said, If you weren't Sincere, I'd punch you out. So, you know, there I was, you know, I never worked. You never manage people, right? So I had to, you know, learn this Zen of management. And so it took me about four months to kind of get my bearings. And in finally, at three months, we're kind of really hard in the last month, I started to understand how to do that managing thing in the kitchen. And just when I was thought I was getting it, they signed me someplace else to work. And then it was a whole new thing to learn. So the point being, that you learn a lot about yourself in what you do, and, and engaging in different things is challenging, but that's valuable. There's something else that happens when we enter into an activity and our self consciousness or difficulties can disappear and we just there fully for that one activity. And we're not there doubting what we're doing. We're not there, yet. impatient or not, they're greedy, trying to get something, it's just there for that activity, just washing those dishes, just sweeping the floor, just sitting and meditating, just driving to work just that, as opposed to all the other things we can be doing.

Where are they just nice about I think nice about this answer is that it's a, it's not an abstract answer. And often when people try to answer the question, Who are you? They often give abstract answers, we look for abstract answers. And, and in Buddhism, in a sense, if you want to have an answer, it should be very concrete, meaning it should be something that you can directly experience here and now. It's not something that you remember from long time. One of the ways to get strongly disapproved when you go for these one on one meetings with a Zen master. If they ask you who you are, and you say, you sit, say something which is not pertinent and relevant right there. And then Like, you know, you go up and you know, if I was a dishwasher in the monastery and they say, Who are you? I said, and I would have said I was the dish on the dishwasher. out, come back tomorrow, try again tomorrow. Because when I'm sitting there in the room with it, I'm not the dishwasher, I'm not washing dishes. So saying I'm dishwashers referring to the past. So that's just, you know, abstract to that point. So I've lost, you know, then you're gonna doesn't work. So how do you how do you say something as concrete here? And now how do you so it really requires you to be in the present moment and connect to what's here doesn't require a long search into the future, but a really kind of a deep search into this time place right here. Meditation is very helpful for this process, in many ways, because it helps shed all the identities we hold on to which are not really relevant, or which are not really something that's pertinent to here and now, we hold on to a lot of views about ourselves, and we hold on to them Longer than they're useful. I think of one of the kind of cliché definitions of the self in Buddhism. What is it? Someone says, What's the self, too? This is an abstract answer. What's the self, the other person says, It's wind drag. The whole all the ideas, ideas, we have self, if you hold on to those ideas, slow us down. It's wind drag. Because, you know, if I'm sitting there in that room with the teacher, and I say, I'm the dishwasher, I'm bringing something in, which is not even what's happening here. Now. Some people like some people cherish their identities, they cherish being the dishwasher or the doctor or whatever they do. And so they really want people to see them that way. That's how they find their place in relationship to other people or

their sense of importance. And so they hold on to all kinds of identities long after it's useful for long afterwards really productive new situation. And so the meditation process is a process of seeing what we're holding on to. And learning to shed, it's learning to let go and learning how to be present, without the burden of an identity without a burden of holding on to a role or an assigned identity or assumed identity or all these things. And so to be able to be fresh and new, and just be show up, kind of in a beautiful way, and a beautiful sense of the term, show up empty, empty and fresh, empty and clear, empty, unavailable, empty and ready, empty and just kind of not carrying any baggage with us. And it's easy to see how many people carry baggage with them around their sense of self, their ideas of self. It's sometimes easiest to see it and other people. So you know, we see sometimes that people are we can see it easiest when people see it, do it, assign identities to us. So if you're a spouse or a partner to someone, and sometimes you might certain situations only be related to as that person's partner. And some people find it very irritating. Some people find it very meaningful, but still explained to you, but you're being seen in through that filter of a role or relationship you have. Or once upon a time, you were angry. And now every time you encounter that person who saw you angry, they are assuming that you're an angry person. And even if you wasn't just once upon a time, maybe you were angry for 10 years. But you got over it. Or maybe you're capable of getting over it every once in a while. Wouldn't it be nice if someone just kind of gave you the benefit of doubt and was ready to see you fresh and not carry the old assumptions about you? You know, you're that way. And I think we all have that experience. So people keep us in a certain kind of category or box in define us for ourselves and we wish that they wouldn't leave me alone.

You see it sometimes people do it for themselves, where they're holding on for example to the role you know, I'm so and so I'm This is my role in society is important for you to see me you know as someone who's important and wherever they go they remind everyone I'm a whenever I'm wealthy Some people like to show off like they're wealthy or show off some wonderful accomplishment they've had and they kind of ready to ready to spout out their accomplishments left and right. And you kind of expected of them or the or the fish that they caught, you know, it gets bigger and bigger or there's right all kinds of ways in which people are talking about themselves and conversation as a way to build themselves up or way defend themselves. And you can kind of see, you know, after a while it's too much, or you can see it and other people. It's much harder to see it in ourselves, and how we limit ourselves with identities, how we hold on to roles, how we hold on to judgments, how we hold on to concepts of who we are When you see other people caught up in their role it's easy to define that person in that role. So someone who is a parent like a father, it's one thing to be a father when you're fathering. But it's another thing to be a father when you're not actually fathering your children. And so there are people who carry their role like parenting role outside of the role outside of the activity, and, and they see themselves through that filter. I've done it myself. Now that I'm a parent, being in situations, you know, far away from my kids, and finding ourselves talking about our kids or talking about parenting, and then concerned about Oh, now they're gonna think I'm bad parent. You know, we were talking about how I got angry with my kid. Oh, this means that I'm a bad parent. So I'm kind of caught up in this world of defining myself. In are concerned about who I am in the eyes of other people and I can be tripping over myself quite a bit.

So, so, the Buddha, if you go back to the ancient scriptures, he had a very interesting approach to in talking about himself.

He

understood that someone who becomes liberated, spiritually liberated, can no longer be categorized can no longer be put into a box no longer has kind of an easy identity you can peg the person by so for

example, if someone is Teacher then, like, I'm a spiritual teacher, they say, whatever Buddhist teacher and so that's one thing for me to be a spiritual teacher as I'm teaching. And people seem to be willing to listen. But it's another thing if, if I start doing it, that's my son's Little League games. Standard from the bleachers, you know, it's seventh inning stretch, and let me tell you people up there, put down your sodas and sunflower seeds and let me tell you the true meaning of life. Or, you know, so

So I think, you know, it was the middle of games people don't know I'm a teacher, and I'll stay As a teacher, I don't think I can't I don't get categorized that way, because I'm not acting that way. If I was always going to these little, little game themes, the little league games, and it was super, you know, competitive and yelling and screaming at the umpires and at the other kids and cheering it, you know, after a while the other people would say, Oh, that's the dad who's a little over the top, you know, and it's a dad who's kind of, you know, a little bit over something. And so I would be pegged as that's the kind of person I am. But for someone who's awakened, you don't can't peg them. It's not clear who the person is, in any kind of, you can't. They're just they're there. They're empty and available. They're empty and ready is a popular term. There's nothing no characteristics, there's nothing they're holding on to in terms of identity. There's nothing that they're stuck in in terms of emotions or feelings or ideas. And so because they're not stuck anywhere, the mind is fresh. The mind is available. It's open, its present. It's kind of like space, or like a blank canvas, which is ready and available and responds to whatever is painted on it. But it's just there. Ready? So a Buddha, or someone who's awakened, who are they? How can we understand who they are? We can't, they can't be reckoned. They can't be categorized. They're just they're free. They're categorized as being free, as opposed to being categorized by being something, they're not a role. They're not an activity. They're not an emotional state. They're not a hang up, they're not a neurosis. They're not a, you know, preoccupation. And so you can't quite, you know, there's something about that that's the common term is empty. For some people, that's very frightening. And for some people, the whole process of meditation, deeper meditation where we started learning to Let go of our attachments to self, let go of the activity of creating a self, or seeing our activity of seeing ourselves through a certain lens of this is who I am. This is who I need to be. This is what this is what my needs are. This is all kinds of things, that activity falls away. Some people get amazingly frightened. Some people get very disoriented. And it's quite something to be in one of the safest places in the planet as far as I think, you know, to be at, like spirit rock meditation Center, where they don't lock their doors at night, you know, and it's, you know, it's pretty safe there compared to many places in the world, and, and to see people frightened and there's nothing really threatening them, except they're frightened to let go of who they think they are. Or if they don't have the protection of their idea, this is who I am. You know. So for some people, for example, are attached to being wounded. And so it's kind of frightening to let go of their long held cherish suffering and struggling against it for a long time. But it's frightening not to have it's like a security blanket. Or there's many kinds of identities which form a security blanket for people. And meditation sooner or later asks us to let go. Because it's a kind of a wind drag is kind of suffering to hold on to it. And then when you let go of it, who are you? If you let go, well, then the early Buddhist traditions says we don't answer that question. The question doesn't pertain anymore. So what's an example like it's like, you know, if you so the canvas examples, one example, you can have a blank canvas ready to be painted on, but it's more like since the mind is not a fixed thing. It's fluid. When it's mind that's relaxed is fluid like water. It's like painting on a flowing stream, water paints in a flowing stream, you know, you might be lucky to get a, you know, if you draw really fast paint really fast, you might get really lucky to see something I'll give you a circle. But it flows away pretty quickly. So, when the mind is free, nothing sticks there, nothing that we can form an identity around sticks, the minds of tenant tendency to attend to the figuration falls away. And then rather than being stuck and frozen, you know, the stream begins to flow, and the stream is available and flowing and fluid with what is rather than



then stuck. And so by the time we get to the Zen tradition, you know, the fluid river is defined by the bend in the river. No and that goes over a waterfall. The river is the waterfall when it goes around the bend, it's the bend when it goes through shallows, it's a shallow. So when the monk sweeps the monkey sweeping when the monk eats, the monk is the eating when the monk talks with a friend, talking with a friend. So

I'll play that made some sense. So now, I apologize for talking so much. It's an occupational hazard. I've noticed that the Buddhist teachers that longer they more years that taught and what do you think they get better teaching and they learn to say fewer words. But as I've seen, they tend to talk more and more. So now but now's your turn. So do you have questions or concerns that you'd like to ask this topic and covering all the These weeks, anything you'd like clarification about or? Yes, please.

Mind my questions from last week

that I'm not sure if I can even form it because I'm not sure I even grasp what you were saying. You were talking that you were reading something that the Buddha had said about. You were redefining himself as soul. And that soul doesn't exist. I wasn't sure what you were saying. And then you were what I remembered you saying something about? So I'm probably remembered wrong because I was not following it. I mean, I was confused.

But there was something bad

Do you have control over it?

Do you? Is it constant? And is it joyous or blissful? Can you re explain all that?

Right? So what I was trying to say is that if we translate directly the ancient scriptures of Buddhism into English, and translate the word and not as self, it gets confusing here in the modern West, we have so many different meanings, associations around the word itself. And it's, it's worthwhile going back to the early scriptures, early texts, I'm trying to understand what did they mean by this word translated itself? What did they actually mean themselves in that time, by the word artha are not the means not self. So the word and so the Buddha never defined in a very clear, concise way. But there are a few places where you can see what he what he's actually bouncing off against. Because he's he's criticizing an idea that was present in his time. And the art the idea, the Ottoman idea, and in the scripture that I read from this text direct read read from. From there, it's, you can see what the Buddha, what the Buddha was reacting against was a particular idea that the atta which maybe is better translated as soul there it is itself because it's a little more going for in his time and place there are people who believe that the atta had to be permanent, this the atta had to be something you had some control over. And the atta had to be something that was in perm, blissful, permanently blissful. And so then the Buddha said, if you look at what you can directly experience, you know the world of direct experience, you can actually see not some abstract ideas, but to direct the experience you'll find nothing Which is permanent, that you have absolute control over, and which is permanently blissful. And when you can't find that, in any of your experience then doesn't make sense to attach to anything or to continue the search for a soul for an essence that way. So it was a very particular idea of artha that the Buddha was talking about when he said anata. And that's the sense of how particular he was, is lost often in English translations in modern Dharma talks. And many people will expand the idea of unaka to mean much more than meant in the original. So that's what I was trying to say.

Thank you Now, it makes more sense to me. Thank you.

I was wondering, so where does that self making habit? Where does it come from and What's its role mean? It has its purpose.

I think that I don't know the I don't have a good answer for that where it comes from. I mean, it certainly comes from our neurophysiology. It's recognized now that, you know, our brain has the capacity for creates ideas of self identity. It has, it's very useful. It's probably one of the important reasons why human society is developed as again, you know, if, you know if I need to pee, I don't ask you to do it. For me, you know, it's it's clear that I'm here, I'm set up to me to do it. That sense of separation and sense of, of responsibility and impact on here is a very important thing with finding our way in the world. But what happens is that we get it, we build on it. We build more and more complex abstract ideas about who we are. And we establish some of them are based on our culture, our family, our experience, and then we limit ourselves by those ideas. And they might have certain usefulness in some areas in some places. But then we we clean up fluid with it. So it is useful for me to consider myself a parent, when I'm parenting. It's useful for me to consider myself, you know, a man when I'm looking for a toilet. And it's useful for me, there's a lot of useful kind of identities to have, but there's also ways in which and then I can get trapped in those very same identities and not be free. So how do we, so the issue in Buddhism is not so much the identities that we have, but the real issue is, are we attached to them? How do we hold them? Are the identities realistic? Are they true? And then if they aren't true enough, are we attached to them and We all know if you're attached or not. If you're suffering around it, if you're suffering, then you're attached. If you, you also know that you're attached to it, if you sit down to meditate, and you can't stop thinking about it. So if you can, if you can let it just drain away like a poem, just let it let your thoughts kind of drift away, like clouds in the sky, become thinner and thinner, then that's great. But you sit down to meditate, and you're still concerned about all kinds of issues that mostly have to have you as a central character. It's amazing for most people, how much of our thinking is self referential in nature. And so that self referential nature indicates that probably, there's a lot of attachment, a lot of clinging or a lot of things that we're kind of preoccupied with. And so we're not for the free in relationship to sell. We're still negotiating Discovering, fixing, manipulating, trying to find ourselves one way or the other. And so as we become freer than you sit down to meditate or do other things like that, and you'd be it's easier to let go of that and not have it be an issue become empty. And then you can when you go into new situations you can be the situation's much fresher, newer, you're not going with a certain bias that comes with previous self identities you hold on to previous judgments you have about yourself previous previous conclusions you have about yourself. So I don't know if that answers your question.

Can you touch very briefly on how the concept of anatomy relates to the concept of reincarnation?

So the question of how the teaching of a knot relates to the question of reincarnation. Generally, in the Buddhist and Buddhist circles that I'm in, don't use the word reincarnation. Because the idea in Buddhism, they use the word tend to use the word rebirth, or re becoming. And they don't like to use the word reincarnation because reincarnation for Buddhists at least implies that there's some thing which gets reincarnated again. And Buddhism, there's no thing that gets reincarnated because there is no essence there's no soul. And so, probably one of the best, you know, and I've tried to look at to study what Buddhists have said over the millennia about this whole issue of rebirth. What is it that gets rebirth reborn, how does it work? And it seems like an obvious thing to say, Well, it seems to not go along well with the idea that there if there is no essence, then how is it that from one life To another some kind of continuity. And as far as I could tell, there's no good Buddhist explanation for this. I think the Buddhist haven't been so good at the science of rebirth, maybe it still exists goes on with the best kind of approach to progress, the best way to understand it, it's more like a,

a,

you know, when when, when there's a wave that goes through the ocean, you can watch the wave moving from across the Pacific until it hits the California coast. And it seems like that wave has a certain is a certain thing. But in fact, if you look carefully at the molecules about wave, the molecules, there's a lot of molecules going up and down, and they're hitting the molecules next to them. They're going up and down. And the molecules are not moving across the Atlantic so much Pacific. It's kind of like the wave and in sports theaters, or sports arenas, you know, like people put their hands up like this over their heads and make a wave and it looks like there's some Moving around the stadium. But in fact, no one's moved everybody still sitting in there sitting in their chair. So there's a momentum that goes on and that momentum is held in consciousness, a very big term. And so your conscience, it has a certain spin and spin on it. So if you spend your life being greedy, or spend your life being hateful, or spend your life, being fearful or spend your life being, you know, I don't know, deceitful, or generous or loving, or whatever, each of those things puts a different spin on your consciousness. And so when you die, that consciousness somehow doesn't just kind of disappear just like that. Poof, it's you know, over, but the momentum continues and that momentum somehow strikes, some other consciousness that's being born someplace, and it puts a spin on it. And that spin is that is their karma that continues into next life. Really you could be born, you know, or, you know, the whole question of you know, is it you being reborn or you know, or you know, you know or if you've never in your left last lifetime you were earthworm, you're not really you you're just you're reborn earth

who knows

I don't know how this stuff works and also even though I've tried to understand it, I'm not that interested in it. It's not it's not pertinent to my approach to Buddhism practice waking up being free. I don't see don't just doesn't have any role that's important. In fact, not only doesn't have a role, I think more often than not that gets in the way of the real, real work that needs to be done in spiritual practice of waking up and being free here and now.

So

So we should stop, it's over, it's still over time. And if you want you can come up here and ask me if you'd like. And so I hope that hasn't been too much confusion in these last weeks with these this topic, I was hoping to clarify something which usually is confusing for people. So hopefully it's been more clarified than confused. And, and if you still leave confused then I'll read from this book again. At the end of the detailed discussion of the Buddhist teaching on self and not self, the Abbess paused and then concluded, we are so alone. We are not even here to keep asking Helps company.

The monastics weren't sure they understood what the Abbess meant. Later when they asked her, she replied, then not self teaching can be challenging until you realize that there is no one who is challenged.

So now you go home happy content. Thank you