

# 2012-06-04 The Buddhas Teachings On Not Self

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## SPEAKERS

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Good evening. what I had in mind for this evening is to try to talk to you a little bit about the Buddhist teaching or not self. The teaching itself is somewhat infamous for being sometimes difficult to understand, perplexing. You What do you mean? There's no self? You know, if there's, if there's no self, then you know, who brought me who brought me here today? You know, I was the one who brought me here. So there's a self that operates is always there's many reasons people get perplexed. One of them is in fact, because people think the teaching is that there is no self. And in fact, you don't we don't find anywhere that the Buddha taught that there is no self. He was asked, point blank Is there a cell for is there, no cell And he refused to answer the question. And other places he pointed out that to have the view that there is no self just leads to confusion. Now, there are many books that teach that many Buddhist teachers who insist that what the Buddha teaching was, was teachings, there is no self. Some people might find very helpful in that teaching. But it wasn't what he taught. And I think that the premise to to start the discussion of Buddhism or Buddhist practice, from the point of a philosophical point or idea like this, that there is no self or something like that is starting at the wrong place. I think many people come to Buddhism, with ideas about wanting to know who they are wanting to know the truth. And often it's like, I want to understand some I want to have an understanding. I want to To see what's true and what can be more true than to understand who you are. And to understand that this is who I am, or this is who I'm not, not this, there is no self in some deep way. Some people is very satisfying, very meaningful, and some people, it's just confusing to hear it. But rather than approaching Buddhism, from the point of view of some belief and teaching like this, there's a whole other way of approaching it. And if you approach it this other way that I'm going to try to explain tonight, perhaps this teaching of not self will become much more obvious and something that you can recognize for your for yourself, you know, you don't need any philosophical explanation for how it works. And the way is to not begin by philosophy or ideas, but but to begin with a mind that's meditating. And there's many things that can happen when people meditate, and don't want to say that it's supposed to be any particular way but Generally, meditation is associated with becoming calm. And it's happened sometimes. And what part of what calm means is that the normal agitation activity of the mind in the body calms down. If you're busy living a busy life or an anxious life or a greedy life, the mind can be spinning quite fast. The body itself can get quite agitated and worked up and a lot of energy and everything going. And sometimes it's quite a surprise to people to sit down to be quiet, and to realize that can't be quiet because of how much energy activity thoughts feelings are churning away. But then, as people learn a little bit more about meditation, develop the capacity to get them to refocus mindful, step away from their entanglement with all their thoughts, their ideas and their feelings. Then at some point, the body mind starts getting calmer. Sometimes comes with other qualities, not just calmness, but sometimes a feeling of contentment. Sometimes a feeling of peace, sometimes a feeling of being whole, complete, as

opposed to being fragmented or incomplete in some way. There's a variety of kind of nice ways of feeling or being that can happen. So for now, let's take the idea that the mental activity calms down. And imagine that maybe it calms down quite a bit. So you heard they thinking it all you're thinking much about things.

Then you come to the end of your meditation. And what happens when you come out of meditation is as important as what happens when you're in meditation. Some people will cut meditations over they just going, you know, jump up and start the day and forget about that. But the transition from coming from meditation out of meditation And into your life is a time where you can watch. You can notice and watch carefully how the activity of your mind gets through re re emerges. Because sooner or sooner if you're calm and settled in meditation, chances are, you're not going to keep that when you start your day. And if you go back into your full swing of your day, it might carry with you a little bit of Calvinists through the day. It's one of the reasons some people like to meditate, that cares it kind of kind of occurrence of calmness or subtleness. But it's all too easy all still to get caught up and involved in all the things that you're doing. But if you watch carefully what happens as you begin to reemerge the activity of the mind. One of the things you might notice, is that re-creation re-appropriation or re-assertion Particular particular kinds of mental activities. And one of those mental activities, that's very important for human beings is the mental activity that creates a sense of self. That creates ideas of self. So you might come out of meditation and, and perhaps, you know, like, if you're a parent, you Come out, come on with me and come out of meditation. And one of the things I think about soon after being, you know, coming on meditation and thoughts related to being a parent, got to make breakfast for those kids and get them ready for school and I have to be a good parent, whatever it is, this idea of being a good parent comes up. But a month or two ago, it happened that I cannot have a morning meditation and my two sons were not home. And it took a moment to catch on. Because the idea that I was a parent and I to act like a parent was such a habit that that I could watch is created but there weren't home there were often school trips and stuff, right? So, being a parent wasn't needed. But then there's other selves to be my wife was home, so I gotta be husband. And so husband thoughts began to arise. But it's had happened that I've had times where neither my kids nor my wife had been home. So then what arises then there's no need to be a husband and have a husband thoughts, no need to have father thoughts. What kind of thoughts you know, Arise, then maybe, you know, for your sake, I have teacher thoughts. You know, oh, I gotta be a teacher. And then, and then have thoughts about being a teacher. Or, you know, there's a variety of kind of thoughts that might arise. might, you know, I like to go to the gym in the morning sometimes. And so, you know, doesn't happen to me, but maybe it could happen, like, you know, like, my identity issues from being in the gym. Like, it's really important to have a certain kind of shorts. You know, really usually it's important to because, you know, it's important to kind of be a certain kind of man when you go to the gym, and, you know, and show people how strong I am. And, you know, and maybe I should oil up muscles a little bit. So they so they shine and because, you know, when you go to the gym, it's important to be seen, right? and things like that. Were actually one of the gym I like, is so nice. I like because I go because I don't think anybody looks at anybody. And there's all these, you know, people in every possible funky clothes and, you know, so it's not that kind of place, but you could it could be that kind of place, right? I want my muscles before I go to the gym. And so what you see then is a kind of a creation of a self ideas about who I am, that come into play? Some of these ideas about self have some semblance to reality, maybe I am a father, I'm a husband. I am a gym goer, you know. So there's some things like, you know, like when I go to the gym, there's certain identity that's important to have with me and to keep that identity close at hand. Because if I don't keep this identity close at hand, I'm going to get in big trouble and upset people. And that is, it's important to remember that I'm a man. And because I can't go into the wrong room, the woman's right to change. And so there's a certain identity Association. I'm a man that is a useful one to have at that time.

So what I'm trying to say is that it's, it's, it's possible to be in meditation, and have any kinds of thoughts about who I am, not operate because you're calm and settled and it can be very content, peaceful place. And then as we come out of meditation, a variety of different kinds of things. Thoughts about who I am, come into play. Some of them might be accurate enough, but some of them are accurate, but not needed. You don't need to operate on them all the time. Some of them are inaccurate. One of the forms of thinking that the Buddha said is a manifestation of clinging is the thought that I am good. And also the thought I am bad. Both of those are forms of clinging, he said in particular sutta and are not necessary to have those kinds of thoughts. It's just him. It's a kind of selfing. And so we talk in Buddhism about this phenomena, of selfing of creating a sense of self creating ideas of me, myself and mine. Now you could argue, which some people will Well, there's what's wrong with that? Of course, there's things which are mine is course there's me. Of course, there's I. And you know, these Buddhists don't know what they're talking about. That's one option. Do you think another option is which I think is the Buddhist approach is not to get into the philosophy of this. But to watch the activity of your mind what happens in your mind when you come out of this calm, settled state. And you can see how the mind has a thought or an idea or a sense that gets created that arises. And when it arrives and you see it emerge, then you can ask yourself an amazing question. And the amazing question is, do I need to use it to eat to have it right now? Is it necessary if you are calm and settled, and you see that the ideas of self that are come into operation Are agitating, or bring this content, you you It causes you to lose some of your piece, then the question is it necessary to really do this becomes even more interesting. Maybe I don't have to assume this identity right now, maybe I don't have to act in this identity or believe in it or what happens if I just stay relaxed, open and just operate in the world without such a strong sense of self idea of self. When I was a relatively new practitioner, I began to see very clearly how attached I was to ideas of self. And in one way is one form that I took was really important to me how people saw me I to be seen a certain way. And so I would do a variety for a variety of social gymnastics to try to help Make sure that people were, you know, I was going to manipulate people, right? To make sure that people would see me for how I want it to be seen. I have no idea how successful it was. But there was one place I went where whatever I was trying to do just obviously didn't work, the social games and that's why I went to San Francisco Zen Center, where I first practice Zen center, practice Buddhism. And I found it really kind of jarring at first, that I'd go into a social situation, and I played my nice skill games. And, and there was no response that they weren't buying it. There was no like, it was like this. You know, like just you know, it didn't go anywhere. It's like, and people but there were like mirrors I got to see what I was doing because there was no for the my usual responses that I was got my friends and people and it was kind of jarring, but Then when I started to appreciate it, so I want to go live with those people, because I need help. I want I want, I want, I want, I want to be challenged in this way. So I don't keep falling back into this social thing of trying to be someone for other people and all this thing that was doing.

And as this proceeded, I did move to green Gulch through Zen center. And, and I was challenged in this way by the community there and by the practice there, and it came to a point where, you know, because of what was happening and meditation is settled the dropping away of this, temporarily that I saw how I was how I was caught up in self and self identity issues, and how I wanted to be seen how I wanted to be presented and who I thought I had to be in the eyes of other people. I could see it's a very, very clearly and I knew that in order that what was called on for me was just was to let go of that kind of like step into the abyss. Let go Have that and I was afraid to, I would stand there felt like To me it just felt I feel like I was standing at the edge of a cliff. And I knew I had to let go, but it was a cliff, you can't step over the edge of the cliff. So you know, so it took me a long time, before I was willing to kind of take that step and, and somehow enter into the world and be in the world. Without this usual senses of self and ideas of who I am, that we're operating. So from meditation, then you want you can begin watching the activities of your mind. And as you track the activities in mind how your mind functions, you can become aware of what activities in your mind are drag are not so nice, nice in even if they're

philosophically true. You know, maybe there is a real self but you could watch how the thinking about the real self and how important it is important for everybody to see it. It's just a drag on the mind. It's a wind drag. It's it's, it's it's mind contracts, it gets narrow, it slows it down. Any kind of thinking about so one of my definitions of self, when someone asks, you know, what is the self? Good question, right? So my answer is, it's wind drag. Because so many times when we're caught up in ideas of who we are, it really inhibits or slows us down. It's a it's a, it involves resistance. It involves things not all the time but sometimes. And so you can watch sometimes in meditation, coming out of meditation out of calm, you can watch the cost of picking up and getting involved in these thoughts about self selfing that go on. And then you don't have to be involved in philosophical questions is there is not a self Maybe that's not so interesting. What's interesting is to say, the selfing that I'm doing right now this self thing is not necessary. And maybe I can learn to let go of it. Maybe there's another way of operating in the world. So then we get to something I think it's also interesting is that part of the selfing is we do have perspectives. For how you know about what's going on, we always have perspective. And what's the perspective we have about ourselves? Sometimes it's useful to have a perspective, that you are something that there is a kind of self here. And sometimes it's useful to have perspective that this is not myself. You know, so for example, my wife when she was in her early 30s, had for I think for about three months, she had medically induced menopause. hormone treatment. And she's sometime in the middle of this. She said to me, I'm having all these bizarre thoughts, but they're not my thoughts. And I thought that was pretty wise. You know, usually usually some people think them but I think that for I am they believe because they're thinking it's true who I am, but she had enough wisdom to see that these were not really hers, they were kind of medically induced, you know, drug induced kind of kind of thinking. They were kind of bizarre. And so her relationship to those thoughts was much easier, much lighter, just thoughts happening, you know, and she didn't identify with them. The you know, if you if you come into, you know, IMC and like you're sitting in this place here, and in some kind of easy light way, when you take a seat to chair Question and sit on the floor. It's yours for the duration of the time, you know for this meditation perhaps in the talk and, and you don't think about that much that it's mine. But then you have to go to the bathroom. So in the middle of the meditation, middle of the talk, you get up and go to the bathroom. And then you come back. And while you were gone, someone sat there.

Now Now, the fact that this is yours, becomes much more prominent. And the idea this is mine was more How could someone and then with that sense of mine comes self righteousness comes hurt comes all kinds of stuff. is unnecessary to get involved and then mental activity of this is my chair and my cushion. This is wrong the person's doing it isn't necessarily involved in those activities. The authority of justice can be so strong The story that I'm right can be so strong the authority of being hurt can be so strong, that of course I have to do that be involved in this activity and spin out. You know, maybe, or you can watch and see, this was just a creation of my mind and activity my mind to assume or to create. This is my chair. And I'm only really latched on to as my chair because someone's sitting in it. If no one had sat in it, as soon as I left IMC, I would have no thoughts that was mine. And I probably won't even remember which chair I sat in. But it's an activity of the mind. The idea of possessiveness is my thing. The famous story of Suzuki Roshi, there's a photograph of him saying this and then click the photographs. It's kind of kind of neat to see. He's holding his glasses out like this in front of him, but you know, a foot in front of his face with one hand and what he said Because these are not my glasses. But you know about my tired old eyes, so you let me use them. So that's, that's a different way of thinking. You know, or I mean, it was his glasses, right and he probably had it for a number of years. You know, he was always with him, you know, and then conventionally It was his glasses. So his perspective that he brought was these are not my glasses, but you'd like me to use them which have the you know, the perspective These are my glasses and these are not my glasses, which are those perspectives tends to support the mind the heart being he at ease, and relaxed. I would I believe that the second these are not my glasses is probably more relaxing. This is not my chair. was nicely let me use it before I went to



the bathroom. And now someone else is doing this. Isn't that nice? I'll figure something out. It wasn't my chair was never my chair as opposed to this is my chair. So sometimes that perspective, we can bring a perspective on our experience and a variety of different kinds of perspectives and the perspective we bring the understanding we bring can be consequential, it can create suffering, or it cannot. And, and as some of the understandings that we can bring have a lot to it can be a lot to do with selfing with what is mine who I am, and all this is unnecessary. Can we track it? Can we take responsibility for which understanding we're operating under? There are times when it's useful to have an understanding of this is who I am. Sometimes society will tell you you can't be that way. You know, you're not allowed to be that kind of person. And sometimes it's very hard for some people to really come forth and really take on ownership. This is who I am or appreciation. This is what kind of Person I am. And so there it's very valuable to come forward has like this is who I am. Other times, the attachment to this is who I am, even if it's accurate is when drag. So I believe in the teachings of the Buddha his whole approach to the question of self was closer to what I'm describing today. When you come out of meditation and you study the activity of your mind, then it is beginning with some philosophical tenant that you have to understand. In fact, I think the Buddha was not a he wasn't if I don't know if I'm not a philosopher, but he was not. He was not trying to come up with a systematic philosophy of life in the way that maybe we think of it To be here in the West, a coherent system of thought, based on, you know, fundamental premises about the nature of reality. We've had many times people come to religion with fundamental questions about reality, fundamental questions about who they are, what are places in the universe? I don't think the Buddha was so interested in that according to start there. Because once you start there, you you have to go to graduate school.

And, you know, even then it's not going to help. The but rather, the start for the Buddha was to, to watch carefully how the mind actually functions and works. And where's the suffering? What kind of activity in the mind causes suffering and what kind of activity in the mind releases you frees you from suffering and one of the activity That causes a lot a lot of suffering for many, many people. It is the activity of selfing self identity issues, this is who I am. And rather than approaching this question of who I am from the philosophy philosophical, let's focus focus it from the point of view of where's the suffering, where's the where's the hurt, where's the freedom in how the activity of the mind is. And so, part of the value of strong good meditation, it gives you a vantage point to understand this much more clearly, than if your mind is always agitated. It's kind of maybe a little bit like if you have a piece of cloth that's really dirty. You won't notice one more stain. But if you clean the cloth really well. And then if you clean the cloth somewhat, you can see more. You know, when when a new stain appears. If you bleach The cloth and becomes really clean, then you see even the slightest little smudge that appears on it that you would ignore otherwise, we're you know, we're making all these decisions about the new our new Retreat Center, the remodeling, and what kind of tiles of something to have in the bathroom or linoleum, whatever, and what color it should be. And what other criteria people are talking about, well, let's get a color that doesn't show all the dirt. So we don't have you know, all whites, right? That's what you want for your mind. It's better to have a mind that's clean. So you can watch and see what goes on. If you have a mind that's really agitated and caught up, then you won't notice you won't learn how to take responsibility for the mind and create greater health for it as we go along. So is this making sense to you? Yeah, now that doesn't make sense. Yes, somewhat. So we have about 15 minutes so now you can ask questions you can protest, you can bring up polyphony you can bring up, you can point out how philosophically I've missed the mark, anything you'd like?

Thank you, you're saying that we understood the self is equal to the labels that you put on ourselves. Society like, Man, I'm a man as my gender. So if we trim off all these labels, what's gonna be left? And that's one thing. And the second thing is, you said don't engage the philosophy. In what I mean is that we shouldn't use any kind of word when we are doing. We shouldn't use language in our brain when we

are doing meditation in order to To eliminate those labels, so we can name that entity which, whatever it is.

So let's go to the first one first who sang that the self is whisper would you say labels labels? So. So here's where maybe you want to be careful with the language you use with how you talk about all this. It's probably not useful to say the self is anything. Rather, what you can say is that you notice that as you watch your mind, there's certain activity of the mind of creating an identity, creating thoughts about who I am creating thoughts about what is mine. And, and so you can watch those activities without having to posit or claim this is the self that makes sense.

Almost

I think meditation you shouldn't engage language.

in meditation, you shouldn't engage language. I don't think it's okay to engage language in meditation, and labels and labels. It's okay.

I think that there's ways in which using thoughts and language and meditation can be helpful in ways which are not helpful. And so what's what's useful? What's important, I think what's gonna be helpful is to distinguish between when we use labels when we use concepts and thinking, and it just doesn't help it's unhelpful at all. And when we can use concepts in order to help the mind get more subtle and more peaceful, but if we have a blanket kind of black and white, kind of absolute idea that we can't use language and can't use labels and can't use thoughts, then it might actually be too hard to really get to let the wisdom operate and let the understanding and the left kind of the deeper reaches Meditation unfold. I think, you know, it's almost I think it's impossible not to use labels so not to use ideas or thoughts, concepts. Even in deep meditation. There are some people who say that there's, there's no thought in deep meditation. And maybe in some ways it's true. The usual idea of verbal thoughts, the verbal conversational thoughts we might have might stop completely. And they want to identify things as being verbal thoughts or label, but they hear they hear a car and they record there's something in their mind recognize car. Something recognizes roar of an engine, something that recognizes, you know, an itch, and that's that recognition in Buddhism is considered a label. But maybe it's not verbal. Yes. If you can, please use the mic.

First, thank you very much. I thought that was a x One talk it really that really cleared up a lot for me because I how you started out. I've always been perplexed by this idea of no self. And now it seems to me like it's like, it doesn't really matter if there is or isn't a self what is more important is how our mind is always just framing things. And now and then it might be beneficial. Like say, for instance, if I if there's some kind of injustice that I want to stand up for, I would go now I want to do that. And in the activity of my life, it might be something good that helps somebody. But then when somebody insults me, I'm like, how dare you Don't you know who I am? And I you know, it net. It might be I can't Why do I have to carry this? You know, I mean, why do I, because there is a I had an experience recently where I just, it's funny, tonight's presentation, it kind of rose up to me that I have this hidden belief that Just kind of floated up that if I have enough of whatever, maybe obvious wealth or some kind of our globe strength, somehow people will never insult me even people that I don't know. You know, and I just realized how ridiculous that is. Like, there is no amount of anything that can keep somebody who wants to insult you from insulting and epic if you're, you know, and I don't have to even be insulted by somebody. I don't know.

Yes. So yeah. So the Buddha said this great, great, great tool. pami he said, he says, they'll criticize you. If you speak too much. They'll criticize you if you speak too little. In the criticize if you speak in the middle. No one in this world is free of criticism. And that's a great poem. So people can insult you, but it doesn't have to land anywhere. And if the more you have a sense of self and self identity issues and need to be a certain kind of self for people and everything, the more it has a place to land. And if it doesn't have any place to land, then you know, you know, then you might have to deal with it in some ways, but it doesn't have to affect your inner well being. Yes. So, this is where we say this the idea of a self concept, an idea is seen as a concept, an idea perspective, that is activity of the mind. And the criteria is, is this a useful activity right now? Or is it not a useful activity? And sometimes it's a useful activity and sometimes it's not in

relationship to this.

Yes. And, and this sounds great. So this saves you the perplexity of Is there a true cell is there a true

Hi, thank you. Um, can you talk a little bit more about sometimes when you actually in the practice of noticing the wind drag, but you're not in a space where you can, you know, you're trying to let go and drag, oh, actual practice. At that moment, I understand the continual practice. But sometimes I get the like, oh, and then I still hold, you know, I know that the more you notice it, well, you

know, when I was a kid, what I do with the wind drugs, I put my hand out the window, and, you know, let it kind of fly. And I mentioned this not just to be silly, but if you can't stop it, maybe you can play around a little bit with it. Don't be Don't be oppressed by it. One of the ways to, to add to your suffering is to suffer because you're suffering. And so, you know, try to kind of you know, and so not taking it as a personal You know, you know, Oh, I'm so terrible because I have a sense of self

You know, that's just you adding more you know, it's more self on top of self right? So, you know, so if you're so just gonna maybe even be you know, be amused by it if you can or play with it or you know if you can't drop it entirely maybe there's ways of reshaping it slightly or reusing in different ways or if you have if you're around the right people really great practice is to confess it. I can't stop it, but I'm just a lot of selfing going on for me right now you probably noticed you know, I hope you don't mind too much, but you know, I'm struggling with it or I'm trying to do something but I just you know, I can't it has the upper hand right now. And there's something about confessing it takes some of the power and out of it and, and then also maybe get some help from your friends.

Thank you because that is I mean, that gives you the extra 30 seconds or a minute that you need sometimes that you can't stop the wheel for the snowball.

Thank you.

Let's see, I always think it's somewhat developmental and you know, you don't want to confuse role that you may be playing in life with the self. Okay, you need you need to keep at least somewhat separate or realize that the that you're dealing with things you may have to take responsibility for. Yes, if you're assuming a role, you you take responsibility for it. Yes, absolutely. And it's evolutionary, you have to as a young person, you have to be somebody before you become nobody. I forget who says that and probably is Fritz pearl or somebody But anyway, the eye and then you also want to watch out for when you assume roles. And you're attempting to have a career, for example, you may need to be able to, to have a sense of self that can't be necessarily violated, you have to sort of watch your space people will,

you know, invade that space in the not not the sense of physical space. But you know, if you're trying to develop a career, you know, it is somewhat competitive, those are important things.

So the status, I think the idea of roles are important. The idea that different roles require something of his commitment or like certain way of being in the world. But if you see it as a role, see as an activity that is situational, then you're less like a person that's like to be fooled into thinking this is who I truly am. There's plenty of people who get identifies too strongly with a role and the role of activities, the role is no longer there, they get lost. And also there's persona, there's certain persona we put on persona also can take on and off a little bit. It's kind of fun to experiment with sometimes. And also, there's, like you said, it is a developmental thing by certain ages, we need certain kinds of self or certain kind of self understanding. My son when he was my older son, I don't know how old he was, but maybe he was like a seven or eight. It's for a period of time there. It seemed like it was very important for him to have the identity that he was Buddhist and our family's Buddhist. And I don't know what was going on with his friends and around him, but it was like, it oriented him it placed him in a certain kind of place that made some sense in order of this complicated universe and everything. This is who we are and people. And so you know, that was fine for me. I did find and But I knew that that was an identity that he was latching on to, and I supported it. And now he's 14, he couldn't care less. I mean, now it's probably the opposite, you know, it keeps me away from it. And so certain identities are useful. But also this another day, but you know, you need to have a strong sense of self before you let go of it is, you know, the little bit that's a problem with that statement is that it buys into this whole idea of measuring things or riff or framing things from the perspective of self. And what the Buddha did seems to have done is to try to reframe the whole discussion and avoid discussing things from the point of view itself. And so instead of saying, the good I think, instead of saying something like you have a strong sense of self before you can let go of it, he would say if what you really want to do is to let go of your clinging. It helps to develop confidence. It helps develop the inner strength that helps develop a lot of honesty, integrity, there's these inner quality is a really helpful for that process. A modern therapist might say those are the qualities that represent the strong self. But the Buddhist clients will say, leave that out. No, I don't need to self. But I want those qualities. So I hope all of you will develop really, really strong qualities and, and in having those qualities that you will learn when it's useful to have some sense of self and ideas, perspectives of self. And when it's not, when you can see things as being, this is us. This is self This is me. And when you see things, this is not self, this is not me. And making that distinction. You become freer and freer. And if you use your peace, your ease your calm your settled mind as a reference point for this exploration. It becomes a much more fascinating, interesting journey than if you read the books. So, thank you