

# 2013-09-15 Not Self

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning everyone.

The topic I would like to address today is one that is often strongly identified with Buddhism by many people. And that is the topic of not self, sometimes called no self. And so it's a strongly identified with it with Buddhism often and some people are quite perplexed by this teaching. Some people are irritated by it. You know, what does this mean and it doesn't make any sense. And I think there's some reason good reasons to be put off by the It's taught sometimes. And there's historical growth and how the teachings of no self, not self are not has developed over the centuries. And some of them are not so close to how the Buddha taught in the ancient world. Some of the ways they developed in the modern world was in reaction against other religious beliefs of the times. And so for example, in Sri Lanka, they had to contend for many centuries with Christian missionaries. And so the teachings of anattā became very central as part of the enterprise of distinguishing themselves against Christianity. And so they kind of the emphasis on no self very kind of almost dogmatically was basically kind of a no soul teaching. And then we come to the modern West, and there's a very strong tendency For Western Dharma teachers, to take a psychological interpretation or understanding of this or not know, self teaching. And so whether we grapple with Western psychological meanings of what it means to have a self and what are these Buddhist means, one of the Buddhist mean. So I'd like to take you back, if I may, to the ancient world of time with the Buddha, to help you help maybe try to explain a little bit how these important teachings were held back then, and start with a story. Soon after the Buddha was awakened, I don't know how long after but relatively soon, he was resting or meditating in a park. A, I think we're kind of maybe a royal park or a park in the, in the capital city where he was staying. And there were some young noble men and No, both women and tech seem to kind of depict them as dandies. And they came to the park to just enjoy themselves. And most of the noble men and other women came with their, their spouse, but there was one noblemen who came with a courtesan. And so they did what young people do in parks, or whatever they did back then. And at some point, they took a nap. And when they woke up from the nap, the cortisone was gone. And so was the all the jewelry from the noblemen dandies had all this jewelry and so you know, they were, you know, they want they were concerned they wanted their jewelry back. They figured that the cortisone knows disappeared must have taken them. So they went searching through the park. For the courtesan and then they came across the Buddha meditating under a tree. So they came up to the Buddha and said to him, Have you seen a woman? And the Buddha said, what would you rather find? A woman or yourself. And as the story is told, this got the attention of these young, noble men and women, that they sat down to hear what they had the Buddha had to say. And some of them then became his disciple. So what would you rather find? a spouse or a partner, or you know, some something, where do you want to find yourself?

And I think the implication of this is that the Buddha felt was more important to find yourself. And this is one of the great tasks of human life is to discover who we are to become ourselves in a sense. And as some of you know that one of the great spiritual questions is, you know, who am I discovered there? That is people who take this kind of question and exploration seriously, are just confused when they come to Buddhism and say, oh, there is no self just give up that search. It's misguided, because it seems so central to what we're all about. It also can be seen this and no self ideas is put forward, somewhat disrespectful, of, of ourselves. And this way, you know, and this is certainly not the case in the way that Buddha presented his teachings, which I would argue, did it with tremendous respect for each person in the value of the worth of each person. The one of the ways I like to see this is that the Buddha told kind of a parable of kind of how he discovered the path of practice and how he offered it to others. And the parable is he says there was a a person who worked in the woods and then maybe a gathering wood or something and went into the woods and one day and in the woods, discovered in the shrubs and overgrowth areas of the jungle, evidence of an ancient path and or road and kind of cleared the shrubs and see if actually, there's a, you know, well made. Road, maybe a nice brick road or something that was covered by debris and stuff, and then follow this road that was barely visible. deep into the woods. And lo and behold deep in the woods found a great capital A great palace. Ancient palace a bit long forgotten overgrown, as they do to this day they're finding my and capitals and cities in Central America that are amazingly big, you know, people are surprised by this what they find. And so this person then came out of the woods and went to the local king and queen, and said, I found an ancient palace. Anything capital in the woods and so the king and queen gathered people up and they kind of clear the road and, and marched along this ancient road and re inhabited the old palace. And just in the same way This would explain the parable I have discovered a path and ancient path that's long over, gone, grown. I didn't invent it. It's always been there. But like the dispersion to which person I have, you know, I pointed out where it is. And now it's your job to clear it over kings and queens. And so the idea that through the parable that we're being, you know, our kind of position in the parable, or what's what represents us in the parable is the king in the queen. I, to me that indicates certain respect, nobility of seeing how other people are. And so there's that. And then there's another kind of metaphor that's used for the path of practice. And the path of practice, the full path, for example, the path of practice. That is that of a chariot. And it's not just any old chariot, but a warrior chariot and, and hear the analogy to being a person on This war chariot is being a soldier ready for battle, perhaps an unfortunate metaphor. And I know many people like I'm kind of reluctant to, you know, present that kind of macho, warlike metaphor for the human practitioner for those practicing. But some people find that very meaningful and again, very dignified and it's such a source of power and value, that the practitioner is likened to a warrior. And then you put on an armor to, you know, so it's Mahatma Gandhi used the same kind of metaphor, talking about a soldier for peace. So here it is. And here the vehicle this chariot is called the divine vehicle or Brahma Yana. This is before the Mahayana or the Hinayana was invented these terms back in time of the Buddha they call it he called his path the divine vehicle. says this divine vehicle is unsurpassed, and it originates from within oneself. And then nice.

So you know you that's where the words are clear there you know where the divine vehicle so here the, the qualities of this vehicle, our faith and wisdom which are always yoked evenly together, kind of like a chariot with two horses may maybe yoke together. They think wisdom, shame or conscience conscience is its poll. The mind is the yoke tie. Mindfulness the watchful charioteer the chariots ornament is a virtue. Its axle is concentration. Energy is its wheels, equanimity keeps the burden balanced, free of desire serves as the upholstery, goodwill harmlessness or the chariots weaponry, and nice harmlessness is your weapon for barons its armor and shield as it roll towards security from bondage. The wise depart on this vehicle inevitably winning the victory. So, for whatever the no self teaching means, not self teaching means here again we have this example of a practitioner not becoming self effacing and not counting being nobody. But we actually have someone who is you know,

is a warrior is a dignified, warrior powerful person on this chariot with these great qualities like weaponry. So, is kind of like the worldview of the ancient ancient times. This is kind of the context for the teachings of itself. So this is part of it. So you can't deny this, you know, you have to remember this whole to hold it there. And so because of this, it's part and I think it's useful to look at how the Buddha understands what it means to be a person. Before we go into what is self and not self. What's this understanding of personhood in this ancient world? What does it mean what is a humaneness like? So there's a few things we can kind of pull out. One is that a person is someone who is capable of experiencing happiness, and suffering, happiness and unhappiness. It person is possible to experience integration and this integration it's possible to experience wholeness, Or integrity it's possible to experience this integrity or a person is possible to be in bondage. In language of the ancient world, or freedom. We often use language or freedom for Buddhism in the modern world, we tend to avoid the, the other half of it to that it's the contrast of it bondage or the ancient world is sometimes talked about slavery, being in bondage to your, your attachments enslaved by them. A person is a moral agent has agency, the human the person is someone who can do things that have consequence that a person can have, can through their choices and their actions can make a difference for their welfare, for their well being for their happiness and the suffering. Maybe this is obvious to many people in the West in this decade. But in the ancient world, it wasn't so obvious to people where sometimes the idea was that the gods were the ones in charge and you had to kind of pray to the gods or make sacrifices to Gods and then maybe you could be happy or that there was nothing you could do.

The that sense of personhood is, is that there's a continuity of the cause and effect stream that human beings involved in that what the person does as consequences that we carry that carried with us into the, into the next day and the next month and next year, and in classic Buddhism into the next lifetime as well. So that if you do acts of generosity, those practice of generosity, condition, a habit or conditioned us in some ways, and that conditioning and that impact of that generosity has a very different effect on our ongoing welfare than if you were miserly, miserly conditions as a different way. And so, a human personhood is someone who has continuity through time, certain kind of way, there's a part of a stream of cause and effect. And that we can participate in this stream, through our choices, about what intentions what we have there, what what actions that we live by. And then finally, the Buddha had the idea that some choices that the individual can make are more worthwhile than other choices. So it's more worthwhile choosing to be generous than miserly. It's more or worthwhile to be kind and friendly than it is to be hateful or spiteful. It's more worthwhile to do to do the actions which lead to freedom and those actions that keep Persons slave or bring us to be enslaved, caught and attachments and all that. So since this is a kind of some of these very general ideas of a person, these, you know that, that somehow the ancient world, the Buddha kind of held, these are not being denied whatever that are not that I'm not self teaching is so in summary, I'd like to say that. So there's a certain valuing and worth fullness of the human being, but the individual for each of you certain dignity in which kind of you're viewed, and you're viewed in a way that you have some ability to choose your life in ways that are important to make a difference. Perhaps not in external ways of your life. But you have certainly the ability to choose how you respond to your inner mental, emotional response. You have some agency over, not automatically in all ways But you can develop yourself, you can cultivate yourself. In fact, the ancient world in teaching the Buddha, the Buddha talked about people that had developed self, that people have an undeveloped self. And you know, there's no inner strength and development in discipline, but you can actually develop yourself slowly over time. And the idea of a slowly developed, developing so slowly over time, becoming stronger in certain qualities and capacities, is part of this idea of personhood in the ancient world. You follow me enough where there okay. So then we come to this teachings of not self. Some of it was clearly in contrast to teachings in the ancient world, that are like into our maybe word soul. That there was the ancient world had a certain some people had an idea of some kind of eternal and unchanging soul. That continued beyond our depth.

And the Buddha pointed out for him, that there's no way of proving such a soul. There's no way to find and see such an idea. And because it couldn't be proven or seen, he felt it wasn't really useful and for the purposes of becoming spiritually free, and so he just put it aside. It's the impression I get. So what So, but he talked about not self in other ways. And I think this is a maybe an example that maybe gets you into the territory of what the possibility of potential he's pointing to. So imagine yourself in a situation where you feel really at home, maybe you're at home or maybe you're in a natural setting or someplace where you don't have to be anything for anybody. You don't have to prove yourself. You don't have to take care of anybody. You don't have to worry about how people see you.

Maybe you're completely at home just completely at peace and being yourself. You have no your soul at home and it just at ease and enjoying yourself that you have absolutely no thoughts about who you are in relation to anybody else. And you're pretty peaceful. You're relaxed, you had a good nap. Maybe had a good meditation. Maybe both. And you're just sitting there maybe on your nice chair, having tea looking out the window. I say being nobody doing nothing going nowhere. Just content just alive is enough. Just content peaceful. Open and then someone knocks on your door. Someone comes up. And so you your watch your mind, what happens to your mind as the door gets knocked on. You see that in subtle ways, your mind begins to contract or get focused, or get a little bit worried or concerned or in subtle ways the mind contracts around. You let maybe you look around your apartment and say you know, it's a little bit messy. I don't want someone to see me as a messy person. And so the minute you watch the minute we'll be contracted around an idea, an image of who you are, who you don't want to be, how you don't want to be seen. So that from the from the Buddhist point of view or the practice point of view, Have what's interesting here is the contrast between the mind that was peaceful and open and not concerned with self at all before the knock. And the contraction, the tightness, the stress that comes up maybe very, very subtle concern that comes up when we start with the ideas of self and who I am and how people are going to see me come into play. And perhaps, you know, look out the window and you see who's there. And depending on who's there, and maybe on different days, you do the same thing, same scenario. And the different people come and after a while you notice how the different ideations concerns that come up the different ways the mind contracts, depending who's there you know, so, you know, it might be the in laws and that produces this sense of self self image, what you don't want to be do be something or maybe it's your date. And so while you got, you know, then you have to kind of create another kind of self different kind of self and you're in loss. You know, you have to put on different clothes right? Using probably the clothes you put on for your day a little bit different than the clothes you put on for your in laws. So the self image how you want to present yourself or perhaps it is a neighbor in distress. Or perhaps it's a solicitor wanting you to sell you a magazine subscriptions. And, you know, you can go on and the scenario probably is other scenarios which are more useful for you to consider where you can imagine yourself in the process being somehow at ease and peace, no concern about self at all. But in seeing that person, there's a contraction and narrowing and preoccupation of focusing of the mind the thoughts, the Mediation is the self image that wasn't happening before. But now is happening. That contrast is what's important. Not deciding which is true. But that contrast. And the contrast in Buddhism that's emphasized is one is maybe peaceful, and one is lost some of its peace. One One is uncomfortable. If the uncomfortable contraction around self image is standard is what we do all the time, we live in that universe. We might not recognize the stress or the tension of it being there. Until we do something like that really takes us out of that world. And we can experience herself in a radically different way. And we see we see what doesn't have to be that way.

So meditation is one of those ways to do that. Going on meditation retreats can do that even more so but there's other things you can people go backpacking or your variety of things that people can do to help them step out of the particular ideation, self image, that they're caught in. And some of them are not psychological, you know, that we've created, you know, just because of attachment and ordinary

sense of self. Some of the ways that we're contracted or tight or held, limited, maybe Limited is a good word limited by ideas of self are because we've inherited those ideas of self from our culture. And it's very hard for people to understand how deeply embedded cultural views of self are in our psyche, and we just take it for granted. So, you know, I think most people in the you know, who have the modern Western acculturation of the individual self We'll take that into the idea of that individual self as being. That's the natural order of the universe. That's the way things should be. That's that's just how it is right? And it's a relatively modern phenomenon. Anthropologists, social sociologists have written about the construction of the modern sense of self, and how different it is. People in the Middle Ages, they say, and Europe would have had completely for an idea, this idea of the individual sense of self or a read and account recently, of a young man on hold. He was 2936 something went to find his mother he hadn't seen since he was five. He grew up someplace like Philadelphia in the suburbs. And his mother had left him with the Father and another sibling, when he was five and this story was that the father was an anthropologist, of indigenous native people in the Amazon and had married indigenous woman from that place. who grew up there, as you know, in a tribe that had probably never almost never seen anybody from outside of the Amazon. So quite separated from any kind of modern world thing. But somehow they ended up being married and she moved with him to Philadelphia to his house, in the suburbs, which was for her eyes, a box where she lived alone, and he would go to work and she was left there in this box. And it was radically different from how she grew up. Where apparently in this tribe this tribe is famous for because apparently anthropologist in the 60s, wrote about them as being the most vicious, ferocious, violent group in the Amazon, apparently wasn't quite true, but but they would, the whole village would live in apartently, a very big Lodge, the whole tribe, all together under one roof, where they have different fires, cooking fires around that's lodged, you know, a family by himself. And so when you woke up in the morning, you were with the whole village, the whole tribe, and you would fight to make love and do all you do in this place. And so they were kind of this sense of being community and connected was, you know, being always people there was part of her growing up so you can imagine how radically different it was to be the individual self and suburban home in Philadelphia. And so she, she couldn't manage there. It wasn't it she wasn't able to continue so she had to go back. She went back to the Amazon and didn't see your son for many years until he decided to go look for her And so you know, so different cultural ideas of self. And so we have our own. And I say this not to say that any cultural ideas of self are wrong. But it's very interesting to do something like deep meditation. Where even though ordinary cultural, ideations, images, ideas that we have self which are so deeply ingrained, we don't even think of them as being something we're doing. Relax and settle out. It's sometimes it's called the deconstruction process. deconstructing deconstructing, constructing all these ideation is very, very subtle ways in which we construct ourselves. And it radical experience just being alive and present breathing, open, peaceful, with some of the deepest or maybe the deepest constructions activities of construction in the mind about self and others. falling away.

Because in that deep deep place of it falling away, it provides us with an interesting contrast the contrast between not having any constructs itself and then starting to pick them up again. And that that contrast is where wisdom can arise. That contrast is where we can look at the beginning of these constructs and decide do I really want to be involved in these? Or how do I want to be involved in them, when are they useful? When are they not useful? As opposed to assuming this is how it is. So some some of the constructs we have, are useful, and some of them the very same ones can be tremendously painful. Someone can be identify themselves with their occupation. And maybe it's an occupation, it's useful to, you know, when you have this job, it's useful to have some construct some ideas of what it means to be a person who has this job. And that people see you that way they sort of authority because of this, all kinds of, you know, comes with certain kinds of add ideas of self, you have to live by if you have this job, and expect and you have to take it into account. But if you can't, when you take off your uniform or you go home, if you can't put this down, then you're probably attached to it,



but I've kind of been locked on are glued onto it. And you end up acting that way in ways which are not appropriate outside of work. And we know that some people get so identified with their occupation that when they retire, they get lost, they don't know who they are. The job might withdraw a particular work occupation might be very useful for society. So it's useful to take On this uniform this role, but it's also important if you want to be free to know how to put it down. So, a person who has like in deep meditation be able to put it really down all these things and really seen the nature of the construct itself and how it arises and constructed and how we hold on to it, and learn to let go deeply enough, can see that contrast better. And then has more room to let go. And so this, this construct of self that goes on this contraction or limiting ourselves by an idea is in ancient time of the Buddha, very often described as, in the, in the form of doing three things. seeing things as me Myself and mine. So mine This is my thing. Thank you. And I'm sure that I could pretty easily get most of you a little bit contracted and focused in a narrow way pretty quickly around the idea of mine. Most of you today here taken off your shoes. I could sneak out during meditation gather up all those shoes and donate donate them to a good cause. And you'd come out of the meditation hall my shoes and you were thinking you don't think you don't actively thinking of my shoes, my shoes all all the time while you're meditating, right? I hope you're not. You know, that's not a thought that you're doing and you're not contracted around my shoes. But as soon as you see them gone, you know the sense of mind You know, becomes really strong. So mine so it's a silly example. But you know, the idea of mind is one of the places where the mind gets caught and contracted. When I was 17 I traveled around Europe, kind of like a hippie, maybe hippie with four other people. We have a commune in the Volkswagen bus, five of us and we had almost no money. I think I had something like \$50 which was a lot of money back then \$50 for my month that I was gonna be traveling around Europe and my friends and my friends didn't have much more. So we slept in, you know, on the van, in the van, around the van, under the van, whatever we could.

But we shared everything. We whatever money we had, we kinda shared wherever food we bought, we shared mostly we bought, we bought bread and canned milk, evaporated milk, because that was like cheap way of keeping going. And then I came back to the last year in high school in Los Angeles. And I hung out with my buddies in high school. And I was it was kind of a contrast of that sharing and everything and freely. And my friends having no concept of that kind of sharing was kind of shocking for me. Like we go out maybe to a hamburger, fast food place or something. And, and so one person who said I don't have enough money, so it's no problem here. I have, like we're all gonna share right now can't do that. And so they say of mine, that's a construct an idea, or the great What a great kind of story mythic story that in San Francisco Zen Center of Suzuki Roshi. There's a photograph For him saying this amazingly enough, so you can see this photograph he's holding his glasses out like this away from him set himself kind of looking at his glasses and he's telling the people there these are not my glasses. But you know about my old tired eyes. So you let me wear them. Let me use them. So they're, you know, conventionally they're his glasses, but he wasn't walking around with a kind of caught in the idea of mind and he had a different looked at it in a different way. So mine is one of the places we get contracted around some kind of self thing. And then there's myself. And so, you know, I'm I you know, I'm pretty confident that all of you at one point or other have been contracted or at some idea of a of who you need to be a self and you know, as they say that many people are more careful choosing the clothes they wear than the wear They speak and most of them admit, you know, a lot of the close thing has to do with how we want to present ourselves to people, often the image we want to make. And so, you know, are you are you You're here? No, I'm not my hair. No way until the hairdresser, the barber does this horrible job. I can't go out. No one should see me. Now all of you I know have outgrown that kind of thing. I'm sure you're all mature. But I have young you know, young kids at home 10 and 15. And in that age range. And guess what? coming home from the barber Oh, you know keep going to the mirror and looking and Oh no, can't go to school. So you know, to dentists. Something as myself, my job, my status, my class, my ethnicity, my gender, by possessions. There's an infinite number of things

we said this is who I am. And in some ways we are those things does not like to say we're not. But this the activity of the mind to say, this is who I am, is one of the places the mind gets limited and contracted. It's an activity something we do. Right, understand. So, then the third activity of selfing activity of selfing. His meme is in the Pali is called me which means here, it has to do with having some kind of philosophical, religious view, but what the core essential essence of who you are is. So the idea of a soul for example, would be one And rather than denying that there is a soul, the interesting thing for practitioners is to notice the contraction that happens in the activity of positing a soul or living around the soul or being a soul. For the modern psychological world, where we don't need too much look at the soul, but rather the self. The idea of selfing of having a central idea of who the self is, can also be a contraction. Or it can be a magnet for all kinds of other ideas of what it means to have a self. Once we pause it, there is a self we have to fill in the blank.

The self is and then you know our society and everyone will help us and there's no shortage of suffering in our world around this idea of filling and this is who I essentially am from the point of view of the practice of practice, Buddhist practice, it's not to look at the philosophy or the view the of what is the soul of the true self. But rather it's to look at the activity of selfing doing this kind of what is the mind do? How does the mind latch on. And in particular, are there ways in which the mind gets limited? gets constricted by the activity of selfing. And the movement of freedom in Buddhism, of letting go have relaxing deeply, is a movement of no longer limiting ourselves through concepts ideas and attachments connected to self. We don't necessarily live free ourselves from some of these normal ordinary ideas of self. But we limit ourselves from the contraction limitation of that and are you know, under the odd but amazing Enough, the Buddha pointed out that even the very the feeling, the sense of I am is a limitation. Even though some people said just the simple simplicity of I am ness can feel liberating compared to all the other ideas. But even that is in itself is kind of limiting. And it's possible to, to see that I am ness is an activity of the mind too, that can be put to rest. And when that's put to rest, then the person who is experienced this is said to have an unlimited mind or an unduly restricted mind. And in a few places in the teachings, ancient teachings, teachings of the Buddha, such a person is called a great self. A Mahatma. Just like The word Mahatma Gandhi, that's a fast way of saying Mahatma great self. He was subtitle. But so a great self is someone who has no constriction, no limitations, connected to a sense of self. So what it means, of course, is that it's better for someone else to say that to you, about about you let them say. Because as soon as you say I'm a great self, you know, you've gotten contracted, you've gotten limited. So there's no room for conceit. No, you know, just just be the free. So that not self teaching. I think in practice has a lot to do with is not limiting ourselves by ideation. thoughts, feelings, ideas of self of me myself in mind. And rather than thinking that you're supposed to now this be be this way. Let the practice do its work. If you're able to use mindfulness, attention, concentration, stillness, peace, as a way to watch and see how the construction of self happens, how the limitations the idea of the activity of selfing occurs. That is where the wisdom happens. That's how the path of freedom arises. We don't leapfrog over into some abstract idea of being no self. We, it's by seeing through the illusion or seeing through the construction of self, that we see the freedom. So the vantage point of peace or ease or calmness, that meditation might give however little it gives is a very useful vantage point from which to watch the, the arising of our constructions again. So if you meditate or if you go for a walk and sit at new window looking at being at home, looking out the window, having tea, and you find yourself relatively kind of free of your usual self ideations. Notice, take the I think there's opportunities to notice how it arises, how it gets born, again, how it gets constructed again, and then stop and take a good look at that. And see it as a construction see it as an activity of the mind. And if you see it as an activity of mind, instead of something that's inherently ultimately universally true, how does that shift your relationship to it? What wisdom is possible within you from watching that happen?

So the whole purpose of the not self teaching in Buddhism is not to irritate you, or annoy you, but rather to help you be more peaceful entities to be free. Thank you