

2014-11-10 Not Self

Tue, 9/15 8:55PM • 40:05

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

buddha, people, conceit, buddhism, suffering, thoughts, teaching, grip, groves, views, liberated, philosophy, called, question, clinging, refuge, practice, important, consciousness, perceptions

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Teachings of Buddhism relatively quickly, they come across the teaching, which sometimes is perplexing. And that's the teaching called teaching of what sometimes known as no self, may be more appropriately called not self. Especially when it's said and when there's a teaching about no self, that raises a lot of questions in people's minds, you know, that people will assume that what Buddha what Buddha teacher taught was that there is no self and since they're standing here, you know, you know, what if there's no self, you know, who am I What's going on here? I mean, this kind of, that's ridiculous, teaching the women no self. More properly, it's called not self teaching is considered to be one of the core teachings of their, of Buddhism. And it's a teaching Which, if you look in the read the early texts, they're the teachings of the Buddha, it probably qualifies as a more advanced teaching. And then more advanced, not so much you have to spend a year studying Buddhism, but advanced in the sense that it's something that becomes relevant as understanding as an insight as a realization. When one's practice is quite strong, when the minds ability to be mindful, concentrated equanimous, is quite strong. And it's a you need to have a strong inner development of strengths of capacity to be able to really see into this aspect of what's called not self and some of those qualities of character that needs to be built up and created. So we see for ourselves and not self Understanding and not self thing are what a modern psychologists many of them would call qualities that make a strong self you know you got your you there you might be going to a therapist there's we need to build up your sense of self. It's important to have a strong sense of self. And in Buddhism doesn't use that language that's so much but a lot of the qualities that a therapist maybe wants to build up for you are the very things that in Buddhism, you want to build up as well, so that you can have insight into not self. It doesn't mean that the Buddha never talked to use the word itself in his discussion and their say, to a group of people who would never heard about his teachings. He ran, he ran into them and he would he was meditating peacefully in a park and they were a bunch of arrestor cats who had Going out for young, young aristocrats who were not to an outing in the park, that picnic or something. And with the husbands and wives, but one of the men wasn't married, I guess. And so I had brought with him a cortisone. And so they all frolic and did what they do. And parks. Yeah, young people, I don't know. They had a picnic and anyway, they fell asleep. They have a nap, everyone but the court isn't. And when they woke up, the cortisone was gone and so was all their jewelry. So they went looking for her and instead of finding her, they found the Buddha sitting under a tree. And they asked the Buddha Have you seen a woman? And the Buddha's reply, you know, think maybe the swords you'd walk by right and he knew, and the Buddhist reply was, what would you rather what would you rather find a woman or yourself. And that caught their attention enough that they sat down to hear what he had to say. And so he proceeded to teach them. And so, you know, you could fill in a blank, what would you rather find x or yourself. And I think the assumption is we want to find ourselves. And in my early years of practice, and when I was a student at subscription center, some of the more senior teachers there would sometimes say that, that was one of the first tasks of the, when people first came to Zen Center, the first couple of years of doing kind of,

you know, more serious Buddhist practice. Especially because back then a lot of the people who came into practice were quite young. Most of the people were probably in their 20s and I was 21.

They were the task was to find themselves so as to build themselves up to understand who they were. And what they sit by the big ones My teacher said was some people once they found themselves kind of had a sense of who they were, what their values were, what they wanted to do with their life, who they were in relationship to other people, how to kind of function in a responsible, honest, ethical way in the world, the variety of things that they learned, that we can call fighting, you know, fighting yourself, they would then leave Zen center and go and start their life do what they have to do. And the way in which they felt this integrated the way they felt kind of their suffering had a lot to do with this whole notion of self and the needing to find themselves build it up, get established that way. And then once that was there, there was no strong momentum to keep practicing. Those who kept practicing beyond that these teachers at Zen center would say Only then would they start practicing Buddhism or whatever they were practicing before it was valuable. But it wasn't Buddhism, because it's not just about finding yourself. But that's an important thing. The other thing that Buddha said about self, which is, I think kind of inspiring is that near the end of his life, where at the end of his life he was about to die, and he, you know, he used when people when teachers die, sometimes they give their best teaching. So the most important teachings they have to give, and so it was close to his death. And he said, Make an island onto yourself. Make a refuge. Make yourself an island, make yourself a refuge. Have no other refuge. Make the Dharma, your refuge have no ever other refuge. So there in that little statement, he said, make the self, your refuge and idea that you yourself would be a refuge a source of security or stability. A place of protection, that you would be, you know, refuge in Buddhism is one of the most inspiring things you can do is usually it's called the Buddha Dharma Sangha. But near the end of his life, what he saw is his refuge was not in himself not in the Dharma, not in the Sangha, but rather you find it yourself, like what's most sacred, what's most important with the resources you have for being free, is found in yourself. And I see that as being, you know, elevating the status of every individual being with offering tremendous amount of respect to our individual values and our importance to that we can find in ourselves a refuge or support a path to freedom. So as practice, so as practitioners deepen their practice in the time of the Buddha, at some point, the Buddha would see that they were ready To understand or to realize to see this teachings or not itself. And before I tell you what that is, and when it kind of, kind of get to it slowly, a little bit, it's an otherwise it's confusing maybe. And so part of the confusion when people hear this teaching, is they, very quickly, many people will interpret it philosophically. And in Buddhism, probably more appropriate to interpret, understand it or understand it psychologically. And what I mean by that is that philosophically, we have these philosophical ideas about who does what the self is, what the soul is, what the nature of the universe is. These big matchings big questions, you know that for what's the existential, philosophical, philosophical answers to the existential issue of who we are what we are and, you know, there's no end to the kinds of questions. There's no end to discussions. You know, we could stay up in the dorms late at night in college, you know, having great debates about what the self is the purpose of the self purpose of life and all that. And the Buddha wasn't a philosopher, he was more of a, if anything, he was a therapist, he was a doctor, he was a, he was psychologist who was bringing a certain kind of therapy, the therapy to end suffering. So he's interested in psychologically, you know, how, and also by looking at psychologically, we look at the mind what the mind does, what's the activity of the mind? How do we understand that? And there are activities in our mind, that we want to see and understand become free of, because certain activities of the mind brings us brings us suffering.

So one of the ways that he one of the things he talked about was he talked about three different areas of selfing that people suffer three different ways in which people relate to the self. That is clearly a psychological form of suffering through psychological attitudes. There was the attitude of craving, an attitude of conceit and attic attitude of views. So craving has to do with the idea that something is mine.

My and you can fill it in my you know, car my house my clothes my know one of the one of the very interesting things is to me, some of you may you know, you found his cushion or a chair to sit in here during during your visit here this evening. And, you know, you've pulled the question off the shelf and use it or you're just You know, found a chair that was empty you sat down and then in the middle of the talk or middle is sitting, you have to go to the bathroom. So you get up and you go to the bathroom. And you come back to, you know to take your place right where you were, but someone else is sitting there now. My seat that was my seat that was my cushion. How could that person takes it a my seat? You know, half an hour earlier. It wasn't not your union, no thought about it being your seat. And if they hadn't sat in your seat, you would have come gone away. Come back the next time you came time see and you wouldn't even know recognize you even no idea what's co chair you were saying we move them around, they have yoga, they move the chairs around my seat. So the idea that something is mine can get us really riled up and it can be as simple as coming back. That's my seat. You doing and So, what are some of the things we take as mine my views, my philosophy, my good looks, thank you, my, my, you know, all these things, but these are this is who you know mine mine and we protect it we try to acquire it. And part of the, that always means it's you can innocently say something is mine. But one way that we suffer around this selfing is the self is that weak is the is the grip of craving. We have a craving I want this to be mine. And so we get a grip onto that and we grip hard enough our knuckles go white, we hard enough we suffer a lot. So that's that's one psychological activity that brings suffering. Weak grass tight grip on tight This is mine. The other way is the grip of conceit. And this is not that something is mine but rather I answers the answers it fills in the statement. I am x. So I'm great. I'm handsome. Thank you. I am you know, you know I'm a very good I'm a good I don't know, whatever you can fill it in. I am. I'm smart. I am. I am. You know, I'm better than other people. I'm worse than other people. I'm stupid. I am. And, you know and there are statements you can say that that's okay. I mean, for example, generally I'm considered diamond meant you know, it's reasonable to say that I'm a man. I you know, it's it's reasonable. I think. You don't really know. You should never assume these things through easily. This is all Different ways of being that are wonderful. But, but, you know, generally you can say I'm a man, you know, it's okay. I go to the men's bathroom after all. But, but, you know, I could go, I'm a man or I can grow at the end right and, and that is a whole different feeling, you know, you know, you know, these are good then there's a, you know, kind of a grip of conceit. I'm special on a man man's man. You know, and it gets kind of fun, right? Or, or sad or something.

But, but the women shouldn't laugh too much because occasionally women do something similar. The so you know, this, I am, I am something you know, and there's a lot of suffering around that the grip of conceit. I'm special. And you know, it's Interesting Buddhism is that the there's always a tremendous conceit in seeing that you're worse than other people that you're less than. It's another way of grip of holding on to some idea, I am this way. So that's a psychological activity that can be done innocently. If you can say I'm something I'm a resident of Redwood City. Great. I mean, that's fine. But a salesman asked me today, I was kind of strange. I thought he said, Well, where do you want to register this thing that you want to buy? So what do you mean Wait, I would register it. Because if you in Santa Clara or San Mateo County, because of property taxes, difference, oh, I am from San Mateo County. I'm a resident of San Mateo County. Thank you. Suddenly, my who I am is very important. You know, and so I mean, you You can kind of fill in and understand, I think that there can be a lot of suffering around conceit. People get very shy, they get very arrogant, they get thick, sometimes they freeze. Sometimes they oppress other people because of it, the grip of conceit, psychological condition, that can cause a lot of suffering if you want to become free of suffering, that's one of the things to consider is the degree to which you have conceit around around self that way. The third form of psychological condition that the Buddha wanted to address is the conceit of us. And in his teaching, that probably translates into the conceit of kind of metaphysical philosophy about the self for our kind of convention for our kind of life here in the West. I think it also works very well for the attachment to stories we have about who we are

stories about how we fit into the world. And so but we can be attached to views and we'll be tested for philosophical positions. This is who I really am. And you can have you know, in the college dorms again, you know, late at night that can be very intense these conversations about what you know what's really true. And is there a soul or is there not a soul? Well I live after I die Will I not live after I die. And people can be very invested in their opinions and views. And they can fight they get angry, they can hold on they can, they can, there can be other gripped views that we have. Again, it doesn't mean that any that views are wrong in and of themselves. There can be views that can be philosophies that are okay to have perhaps. However, it's the grip that causes suffering because your knuckles get white, your hands will get numb. So the Buddha has interest in psychology of suffering and so the suffering as a source of suffering has to do with some activity in our brain or mind that we do that I'm calling now the grip, we grip on or get attached to these things. So these three areas, so if we rush into discussing the philosophy of it, then we missed the point of what the Buddha was about the philosophy of what the self really is, is not really interesting for the for the Buddha. And in fact, he never really answered the question is there or is there not a self? He was asked that point blank once and rather than answering, he remains silent. And so even a lot of Buddhist texts will say the Buddha taught there is no self. He never said that. He never said there was no self. And when he was asked it pointedly, he refused and refused to answer either there is a self there is no self. And he said one of one point, that if you pause it that there is no Then you'll get caught up in a quagmire of views and quicksand of views, you'll never get out. So he seems to not want to go that route. So there is no self.

But this is, but this is what he said. And this is why in order to have some strong inner stability, a lot of equanimity, a lot of mindfulness, a lot of strength of concentration, a lot of maybe a lot of compassion and a lot of goodness, sit there, your refuge into onto yourself, use your present, use your economists you're at ease. You're, you're balanced. So you can really kind of see what's going on be present for what's going on and see in a deep way. And then, and maybe they get a sense that you have the context for the kind of inside the kind of seeing or presence that helps to have This insight is when the Buddha's son was about 20 years old. They would have at that time his son was also a monk, and had been practicing for many years. And the Buddha saw that his son, his name is Rahula was right, that is fairly mature and in his meditation practice in his, in his own practice his spiritual development, and he said, Come with me, and he took him deep in the woods to a place that had this beautiful psalteries my understanding is they're kind of like the redwood trees of the of northern India so quite majestic large trees. And he went to enter into a grove and you can imagine this groves beautiful grow I imagine a beautiful grow deep in the woods, these majestic trees like the redwood trees, and you know, beautiful, maybe inspiring, natural setting. wonderful place for a father to go take his son to have a father and son chat. It's like, you know, used to go up to you know, there's beautiful Redwood groves in California and, and in the context of sitting there in these majestic groves. How do you see yourself you see yourself in a very different way than if then when you go to IKEA probably you know your concerns how you think about yourself and what you want to try to do. And what's important is very different up in the redwoods in the forest than nicaea. And, and, and you know, IKEA, maybe you don't have much resilience for you know, for all kinds of things and what people say to you and who you are, you're really, you know, someone comes up to you narky and says Who are you really? Get away. But you're sitting in the redwood groves and someone says, uh, who are you? You kind of look around and the trees and the sky and the ground and it's like, you don't have an answer, but like a great, great question. Wow. Yeah. What are we here for? like wow, but you know, maybe you go to IKEA and say wow. So the context is important right? So the Buddha took his son into the woods and sat in this beautiful place in the woods in the grove. And I'll paraphrase kind of grossly what he said but he said something was approximately like this is your body, your physical body? Is that really who you are? Is that really who you are? So your body so you know, people can be very attached to their bodies. You know, my hair is so important. When I was a teenager, my hair was really important. There was back then, people my age had long

here I used to sit in class. Instead of learning anything I sit in class, pulling my hair so to grow faster, because that was important back then I had conceived around my hair, how long it was or shorter was that it wouldn't, you know, wouldn't grow from one day to the next, but I'd made different settings in some settings. It was really long and cool. I felt good about myself and other settings. It was too short. And so my conceits are all the stuff my here but you know, I don't I don't nowadays I don't associate with myself myself with my hair. The you know, the classic thing that I had other maybe did is teenagers and visits. I probably I guess most of you wouldn't care if that is it on your nose today. It wouldn't be a big deal. But, you know, because you're not going to high school but if you were going to high school at this, you know, then it's a bigger deal. Context is everything right?

So the body is so the Buddha said is the is the body, your yourself the true self, who you really are and Buddhist on Rahula said no, the body is not myself the body can change the body, you know. And so, in the Buddha said, Our, your or their sense impressions that you have is the word is feeling tones but the sense impressions that they that which comes into your bot here your senses pick up the world of yourself the senses that you have and the experience of your head you have through the senses is that yourself. No experience I have to my senses is not myself. Even you know, the internal senses that pick up sensations inside the smells, I have the tastes I have the sounds I hear. Those are not myself. And then the Buddha said well is are your perceptions yourself. senses are not yourself, but then what you perceive through your senses? Is that yourself? Well, it's obvious that the external world, maybe it's not yourself, you're those perceptions. But what about the perceptions you have of yourself because the mind makes perceptions about who you are. And so are those perception, the minds capacity to make perceptions ideas? Have you ever had an erroneous perception of yourself and thought you were different, you know, then how you actually are? And probably, you have, sometimes that's to do with our capacity or abilities, I can't do that. Or no one's gonna like me, I'm that kind of person. And so we have perception we have an idea. So perception means like an idea and a concept to some singular concept we have but certain things about ourselves are so the concepts we have about ourselves so that who you are, know the concepts are not that. So if you're not your body, if you're not what you perceive through your senses, sense data. If you're not you're concepts that you have. And the next thing the Buddha said, well, then are you are your thoughts or your into your inner landscape of volition and intentions and thinking and memories and projections of the future? Is that who you are? Is that really who you are? And those are pretty fleeting, actually said once he said if you more or less He said, If you really want to identify with something as yourself, who you really are, choose your body rather than your thoughts your mind, because the mind is pretty fleeting, it changes a lot. The body is more stable so it's a better thing to take as yourself. And if you watch your mind, you know it changes a lot your thoughts change or your your thoughts. My wife had to take some hormone therapy when she was in her mid to early 30s that gave her temporary men Pause for about three months I think I thought I took it was a medical condition she was being treated for and she would say these thoughts are not my thoughts you know, the I don't know where these are coming from and this is not how I think they're not my thoughts and it's kind of relief to make time to think that our thoughts not not, not who we are, you know, who knows where they come from, you know, I don't want to be associated with them too much. So our is that inner world of thinking that our true self because it's so fleeting and changes all the time, the Buddha sons son said no. And then the Buddha said, and in some ways I think of this was a guided meditation almost he was giving a son in the setting members of breadboard beautiful grove of trees. And you know, then he's leading him through and you probably each time your body's not yourself. I can imagine because I've know people who do this. I've done this before. Hear that if something drops away, something gets released. Yes, the body is not the self. I don't have to hold on to that or be so preoccupied with my body. It's not really who I am. And then, you know, our feelings are not ourselves, our perceptions, our concepts are not really who we are and kind of release kind of letting go that happens. And our thoughts on ourselves are our Coalition's our intentions. motivations are not who we really are and some kind of release and letting go can happen. And then the final thing that Buddha

said is that is your consciousness yourself. And the Rahula said, No. Consciousness is not myself. And something released at cultures is something that's, you know, especially people who are very mature meditators sometimes get attached to consciousness because it's quite sometimes stands out and highlight in a way that really seems like some special Consciousness You know, that's everything else is impermanent, but consciousness seems stable, and that's who I really am.

There can be all kinds of philosophies and religious points of view metaphysics around consciousness itself. But here the here is no consciousness myself. And so then consciousness, something about consciousness, relax, let's go, some release there as well. And each of these steps have not this, not this, not this, not this. This is not the self. This is not the self. This is not the self. Something releases something, let's go. And as it let's go with let's go is that clinging the holding that we have, and we're released into a state of peace or ease or relaxation or happiness that comes when there's no clinging, no tightening, no contraction, no tension in the system at all. No tension, no tightening in the mind. The mind is liberated and free. And so the word that the Buddha used here was another are not the attorney itself and on means not you saying that these things are not the true self don't take this as a self. So that begs the question, well, if those are not the self, what is and some people say, well, all those things, some people said, the time of the Buddha, all those things are not the self, but you have a self, but that self is invisible. And the Buddha's reply was, if you don't know you, if you can see it, experience it, touch it, if you can't have any control over it or have some agency around it. It has no purpose to call it, you know, the invisible self. You know, it has no role in terms of becoming free of suffering. Because that's really that's, that's the perspective he was looking at, not philosophy, not metaphysics. The Buddha was not a physicist who was Looking at the true nature of reality, he was a psychologist who is looking at how human beings can become free of their suffering. And so he said this is all these things are not self. And so don't have the grip of holding on to them. But he wasn't interested to take it to the next step, the logical step, well, if those are not the self what is because it wasn't necessary for the purposes that he had, the purposes he had was to become free of suffering. His purpose was not to write an essay for a philosophy class. His purpose was not to come up with a theory or grand theory of what the true self is. He did say don't bother with that question. And what's his, you know, don't bother with answering the question, what is the self now you're welcome to do it. Don't think some Buddhist teachers say that any theory about what the self is, will cause suffering. I don't know if that's true. But you're welcome to come up with a theory. But that's not what Buddhism is about. Buddhist Buddhism is not about a theory about what the self is. But rather it's meant to be a pointer or pointing for you to see with tremendous clarity, that you don't have to take or define yourself in some essential way. This is who I really am, and then hold on to it, protect it, defend it, build it up, do all these things that we do with self, all these views and ideas. So we can release and let go. So that so the Buddha had and not self teaching, the who we are, whatever we are here the different aspects Are psychophysical being its character is characterized by not having an essential self. It's a process that's constantly in flux and moving and changing. But there's nothing that stays stable. It'd be kind of like the analogy I, you've probably heard me before, say, it's kind of like you go to a river and the river is constantly flowing. And you take a bucket and fill the bucket with water. And then you leave, walk away from the river and you find some people and say, Look, I have the river. You don't have the river anymore. You know, you'd have a bucket of water. So as soon as you take some, yet you have this river, of our psychophysical being of who we are, and if you choose any single thing, as this is it, this is who I am. It's like carrying a bucket. And you don't really have yourself anymore. And so the idea was don't don't get caught up in this these thoughts about self See, see that none of this stuff qualifies as someplace to grip to hold on to get caught up in itself.

It doesn't mean you disappear, it doesn't mean you lose your your agency, it doesn't mean that you can't take care of yourself. It does mean all those things are still operating. And we want you to have a

strong sense of capacity and agency of managing in the world for sure. But, but you had that agency and that's done with freedom happens when we don't grab or cling or hold on to the conceit of self for the or the craving of self for the or the views of self any kind of the gripping like that limits us. So, the Buddhist teaching, it was a teaching of not self. It was not a teaching of there is no self. So if you hear someone say the book says Buddhism teaches there is no self you're allowed to be perplexed. You know what? And you can enjoy it. Now, you know, the Buddha actually didn't say that what he did say is that there that there are things that there are things that are characterized, you can characterize them by saying these are not self into the body is not self feelings are not self. concepts, perceptions are not self mental formations and thoughts are not self consciousness, not self. And if you can see that, then you got no problems. Last thing I'll say about this is because some of you might still be perplexed. You know, it seems like but still I said, No philosophy and you know, what's that? Rather than looking at this from the perspective of yourself, Look at it from the point of view of what we do to other people. We form attachments, bias, prejudice about other people, that they're that kind of person. And we base it sometimes on their body you know, all kinds of things, the color of their skin, the, their age, through disabilities, their, their gender, their sexual orientation, all kinds of things that we kind of, then we put them and then there's a grip of clinging around them. Because we, you know, we don't believe in any, you know, whatever you believe about self, psychologically, we kind of have put them into a strong self or because of their, you know, their perceptions, their feelings, maybe their thoughts, their beliefs, the stories, they have The intention is a living by there, you know, I don't know about consciousness. But we'd create a tremendous amount of suffering in the world, because of how we see self where we reify other people as being this as who they are. So this movement of learning not to see this is not the self This is that that's not this that's not this. That's not the true person. You know, all these different things, allows us if we don't put people in pigeonhole them into this is who they are, then we can see them freely, let them be free, let them kind of present themselves as they are, and we can meet them as they are. It's a tremendous gift that we can give to others. So much so that you know, in Buddhism, we say that the point of Buddhism is to get liberated ultimate point is liberation freedom. But it's a mistake to think that you You get liberated. me Look, I'm the most liberal liberal I'm the most I'm the person most liberated from self on my block. And probably no one at IMC is more liberated from self than I am. They better appreciate it. There's the idea of that you get liberated, I'm liberated is probably erroneous. What's about me or at least not so useful. What's much more useful is when you get liberated, you liberate other people, from your prejudice, or your bias from reifying and set making them into something and then we help other people. If we can liberate other people from us, then it's a better world. Then they can be themselves then they can be themselves and we want everyone to be themselves. We want you to be yourself, but the self that you know the self that is there without the clinging and the grasping and suffering.

So I hope that made some sense of that teaching for you. And in case it didn't make any sense or not enough sense, or you're still perplexed, you're welcome to leave this teaching here. You don't take it with you. It's and, and it's not, you know, or you might just file it away. Because as you know, as I said earlier, these are this is really kind of an advanced teaching, not because it's for a lot of studying, but because you want to wait until the right conditions in your mind are there to really see this for yourself. I don't know, should we stop? Leave you perplexed and not answer your questions. Yeah. Now that's your questions leave you. So in all of the redwood trees, so thank you for listening and thank you for practicing here today.

Okay,