

2015-12-14 The Teaching of Not Self

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SPEAKERS

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One of the perplexing teachings of Buddhism is one that is sometimes called teaching of no self or not self or non self. And it's very easy to get kind of entangled in philosophical considerations, but what this means and to get into wonderful debates about what it means one of the most common concerns when people start hearing the teachings of not self is to protest that this is has to be absurd, because I'm here. And nobody mean there's no cell phone, I'm sitting right here in front of you. And so the Buddhist way of presenting this teaching of not itself is not to offer it cold, like some great philosophy that you have to understand believe but this Starting point in Buddhism is not who we are, but rather do we suffer. And then, if we're interested in the alleviation of the suffering, of stress of anguish of, you know, the Buddhist word suffering is kind of a catch all word for all forms of being uneasy or being troubled. If we're interested in being untroubled, have an untroubled heart, then it's a different starting point for our investigation. So if the task is not to suffer, then it's easy to start seeing that there are some ways that human beings suffer because of their self. Issues of self identity. Issues of, of what's mine, what's me what's myself. There's a variety of ways in which people suffer and if you Start just kind of starting there with a suffering around this, and then explore that deeper and deeper into us, you get to a clear view of what Buddhism means by this teaching of not itself. And it frees the discussion from the philosophical debates about what it might be and what it isn't. Because it's not really about philosophy. It's about the alleviation of suffering, and sort of, so, if we start kind of at a very, kind of most, maybe broadest way, place. One broad place is people suffer a lot around some people around their possessions. And so they identify very strongly with their possessions, their possessions, sometimes they use them to define who they are. Sometimes their status is as connected to their possessions. variety of ways and if they lose The possessions that sometimes people feel lost, they don't know who they are. Sometimes people assign us identities. Because of our possessions. There was a time United States where you couldn't vote if you didn't own possessions. And if you weren't white, that there we go. So your possessions count a lot for your status and who you were. And not a few people have either suffered or learned not to suffer by a through not to suffer because of how they're attached to their possessions and how the possessions are a reflection of who they are themselves. And some people have learned a dramatic form of letting go of suffering and by letting go of those possessions. And sometimes these things disappear quickly is sometimes I like to refer to my friend who in the early 1990s, there was a big fire in the Oakland Hills. That day she left for go to The beach. And she had her car and her driver's license. And when she came home, her house had burned up. And her house was also her office. So everything that she had, except the car and driver's license, were gone for, you know, in one afternoon. So, you know, what does it mean to start over again, without all the mementos and all the photographs and all the heirloom things that you had all kinds of, you know, our office and everything. So do we suffer? Or do we learn how not to suffer? And you know, maybe a combination of both.

Some people suffer around the idea of their status. And so the status has to do with where we fit into our society or among the people we care about and be at work and our status, commitment go up and down job promotions or job losses. It's not a few people, when they lose their job. It isn't just the sadness of losing a job, but their holidays. of who they think they are, is tied not only to the job but also to the status the job gives and in society in place. And so it's very important than unknown people who've taken very stressful jobs, not because they like doing it, but because they were somehow dependent on the status that it seemed to give them that they were somehow they they were successful, they were seen as successful or they had power or authority or they were at that arrived somehow in some social class or something. And so, in some way or other, their identity, their sense of self is tied to status and where they fit in. And that also can be ephemeral and can be just disappear quickly. And not a few people who have had this uncertain status it just happily maybe or not until the point that they retired. And then they felt lost at loss because it that they weren't being fed and there wasn't there wasn't there for them anymore, and they felt disoriented. And they say that some people actually Die relatively quickly after retirement, when there are so dependent on their work for their sense of identity and well being. And so all these things, I think, possessions status, are not really reliable places to build up a sense of self. And they're not required. You know, and maybe maybe it's a lot more a lot happier if our sense of self identity is not tied to possessions, or status, or our particular work role or things like that. And some of that, you know, sense of identity that comes with that comes because of how I have this sense the ideas of self that people assigned to us. So like status, we assign status, people look up to us, whatever. And so it's a, it's a cooperative effort. It isn't just we don't just do it alone, create a sense of self, but sometimes our society helps us out. Sometimes it's quite painful, right because things like racism People see you a certain way and I sign people certain status and society. You didn't ask for it. But that's what's assigned to you and it's quite painful to, to feel that that, you know, this is not who I am, I'm not, you know, what you're telling me I am. Or sometimes you will internalize the racism to themselves is quite painful. And so it's the whole idea of self gets very painful. For many people. It's very complicated the way our social relationships build up through looking for each other towards each other, for definitions of who we are, or we assign definitions to who we are to each other. And it can be a very difficult place to be if and I didn't realize this until I was I had children who went through grade school. That how vicious some of these kids in grade school can be around these issues. And apparently at that age girls, it can be quite I had no idea. I was in I was playing ball. I didn't realize girls didn't play ball so much in school, they were having these social relationships. And that's what I picked up from my kids grade school. Wow. It's intense world there. And this yourself and, you know, that comes into play quite strongly, early age. My number was when I was 10. I went to school in Italy. They didn't speak Italian. But I was sent assigned to Italian school. The first week of school there was public school metal, a Catholic country, they had a priest who came to teach religion, Catholicism. And I since I joined the class late in the year, I sat in the back row in the back of the classroom, last seat available. I was a new kid in the class and he called me forward to the front of the class and there was a platform right to stand up and slick platform from the class priests there. He asked me what religion I was, well, religion was hardly important for my family. And that wasn't important at all. But I knew that I had been baptized as a Lutheran. So I knew that much. So he asked me what religion are you? And I said, Lutheran? And he said, What? So I said it again. And then he went, like with his hand, he went with like this, like, like, I was, like a little flyer or something. Yes, come back to the back of the room. You know, so I got a little message about who I you know, least hear how he saw who I am, you know, how much I counted. You know, it's we do we do these things to each other.

So there's this whole social world of self and all that can be quite painful. Part of what Buddhist monastics do in theory at least is to step out of that whole social game of self. And one of the ways that they do this, symbolically used to shave their heads because a fair amount of identity issues can be tied

up with hair sometimes. So, but then if we get closer in, in, one of the places that Buddhism puts a lot of emphasis is on is our body, body being embodied and connected to your body, living through your body with awareness in your body. Mindfulness of the body is very important. But it's also Buddhism likes to point out that there's a lot of suffering around identifying yourself with your body. And so you know, this, this is who I am. I had a friend who went off to become a monk, a monastic at this Tassajara Zen centers monastery. And she lived there for several years. First year she got there. She needed people there were given single rooms, little little rooms that some of them had their own little toilet and sink and mirror and she wouldn't got some newspaper and she taped up the mirror. For one year, her practice was not to look at herself in the mirror, because she wanted to free yourself from all the identity, self identity issues that come into play, when she would look in the mirror and see or hear face and all that, as a way of freeing herself from that kind of involvement. You know, and we see we know people, maybe you're that kind of person as well, who can be very attached to your looks, how you look or how your body seems, and somehow how your body seems to be or how it is. You build an identity or a negative identity, you build up some definition of yourself. And that definition or that identification, about how important your body is and how that speaks for who you really are, can cause a tremendous amount of suffering. And we do it to each other. Also, it's a social thing as well. People get kitties, they can be criticized, they can be bullied even from how they look. And so You know, when there's this kind of assault, you know, like, from other people about how we look in our body, there's a kind of an identity that's created that people again, our society helps us create an identity, oh, I must be a bad person or wrong person or somehow I'm not right. And that's must be the truth of who I am. But, you know, we do it to ourselves. You know, and it starts at a very early age. I mean, I was very concerned about how high my forehead is, when I was, you know, I think I remember starting at 12 or 13, I was concerned that my forehead was too high. And in somehow, that was a really bad thing. Kind of rather embarrassing. And I was also worried that was going to go bald. And so the karma of that was becoming a monk and shaving my head for many years. But I used to measure the distance from my top of my nose to hit with my finger like, you know, There's one of the things I did in class, you know, class many hours a week and had to do something in class. And the alternative didn't seem very interesting.

So I would measure that, you know, check. And I can tell you I still remember very well, and I cannot tell you happily let you know, in case you're concerned about these issues for me, he might say that it hasn't changed any distance is the same. You know, and so, but you identify strongly with your body can cause a lot of suffering. And is it really that important? And I think there's a general tendency there for people as they get older, to become less and less identified with their body as being how, what defines them. Some of you if you have been a parent, a new parent, I've noticed a phenomenon among most new parents that I know including myself, my wife, that it's kind of hopeless to try to be too concerned about self grooming, you know whether your clothes are right, you know, you just you know your you're exhausted you know your kid is you know, pouring all your time and, and it just kind of falls away that concern kind of in a way that just feels like sometimes a relief, you know, just just not an issue. But as people get older also sometimes some of the issues that are so important when they're younger no longer become an issue. Sometimes it becomes a bigger issue because of the culture of youth and Pew certain kind of beauty that lives in our society. And so when we get older and we no longer have what this is considered to be the right thing, then we get this negative identity is going to go I'm not right anymore because we identify with it and other people identify us by our body and how we are and so it can be quite painful. Some people have accidents, get sick. in ways that their body gets no, you know, gets damaged in serious ways, and they look very different. Or they get their physical abilities changed dramatically. And there are also others, our own internal identity issues around that and what it means we define ourselves and also what society can do to us can be quite painful also. And with that, and then there's learning to become free of that, to not see our body as ourself and to

you know, be much more at ease and not use the body as a definition, this is who I really am not define ourselves through our body, and what we look like and not have our happiness tied to that definition or to the feedback we get from other people any kind of plus or minus. And so this the stress you can feel the stress level, the suffering level, the anguish level, the that the struggle that goes on around some people in their body and how they look and how to find them. And now we have to be very careful for it. When I heard this little cliché, I was like, actually quite touched by this cliché. That goes something like that some people give more care to how they dress than to what they say. And I think probably That's true, but it shouldn't be the other way around. Shouldn't be more careful about how we speak because that has a bigger impact than what we look like. So to begin to learn to not be caught in the entanglement of defining ourselves or defining other people by what they look like by their skin color, or by their size or by, you know, what, what their body is like, and to be able to see something deeper in them is a gift to people who would never never, you know, aren't used to being defined by their body or some way or other and it's a relief a lot of suffering and stress becoming closer and the Buddhist approach is to go deeper and deeper, then the next layer is around the whether things are pleasant or unpleasant, their sense of pain and pleasure that we can get through our bodies. Some people identify with that very clearly very closely. And it's very natural to identify very closely to it because a variety of different ways, you know, and after all the pain is happening to me, The pleasure is happening to me. And so it's very personal kind of strikes in, you know, you're the recipient of it, or you are it somehow. And so there's a very strong identification, sometimes with pleasure and pain. Some people do this much more than others. And some people feel like if they have pain, of any kind of unpleasant timing, uncomfortable, that it's a personal failure, that somehow you're supposed to be kind of in a cloud and be exposed to be pleasant and relaxed and nice. Sometimes there's a, I think very strong call cult almost or culture of pleasure in our society, the pursuit of pleasure, of comfort of pleasantness of nice experiences that goes on.

When I was a relatively new Zen student, one of the things that I worked with quite a bit was to free myself from being entangled with pleasure and pain, particularly through working with pain. In zen, one of the rules of practice is when you sit and meditate with the everybody else in the Zen meditation hall, you sit in a very strong upright Lotus posture. And you're not allowed to move for 40 minutes. And if you do it, you know, 910 times during the day, 40 minutes without moving, the strain builds up. And so I would sit with a lot of pain, especially knee pain. And so but you weren't supposed to move. So it was, you know, I certainly suffered a lot I handle around that. Sometimes it was great despair and self pity and, and discouragement and animosity to the knees for being so unkind to me and to the bell ringer who wasn't ringing the bell. And slowly I learned that these reactions of self pity of anger of despair of technology says, We're not really needed. And I began to disentangle myself from the reactions, I had the responses I had to it. And the pain became simpler and simpler. And I started to kind of begin to feel that I could have the pain there without identifying with it without relating it to myself, without making itself without being tied. Any kind of self identity or any kind of me myself in mind, it was almost like the pain is free floating. And I'm watching it, I'm separate from it kind of like that. And remember, it wasn't just in meditation I this I got very interested in this phenomena, you know, did a lot of physical work at the Zen Center at the green Gulch farm, for example. And out in the fields, and I had to, you know, love physical work, sometimes it's quite, can be quite painful. I remember like, for example, once I had to, with one other person had to carry really heavy object quite a long distance. And it was kind of optional, you know, when we put down to rest, but I found it very interesting to stay into this very strong pain period of carrying that object. It felt safe, I didn't feel like I was damaging myself. But to stay there with the intensity of it, to see if I could explore this interface between the pain in me and how much I got entangled and identified with it. And how much like what you know could just be there free floating and not being involved in it. And I eventually learned that in the, you know, I can't say that I'm good at this, or always can do this. But in the right circumstances, I've had intense physical pain and joy at the same

time, not joy at having pain, you know, please don't pursue that route. But because by decoupling my inner sense of well being from the physical pleasure and pain, then the inner inner inner landscape had access to deeper wellsprings of deep well being and happiness. That can't happen, if our interests kind of well being is tied to the you know, sensual pleasure or sensual pain. So, to free the identity from that not because you have to be because if you pay attention, you see that the identify identifying with pain and pleasure is a form of stress. And you're free of that stress, then you want to kind of work beyond that. The next next layer in Buddhism going closer would be to look at the particular identifications we have around who we are. And is there stress around that. So it could be as innocent as you know, I'm a man and a woman, I'm gender diverse person, you know, so you have a certain identity, this is who I am.

And that could be neutral, it's, it's fine to have any of these. But it's also can be that again, from the point of view of society and what society does to us or what we do to ourselves, we could there can be a lot of stress around this identities, as soon as we say I am this, then we have to live up to certain standards or, or other people have certain ideas of what this means or we identify with a role. I am my role I am this job. I'm this kind of, you know, and so then there can be a lot of stress around having mislabel when I was in seventh grade, I took an art class. And the teacher came over to look at me while I was drawing something. And she was an authority figure in my you know, my mind. And, you know, she knows she was the art teacher and I didn't know anything about art, but I was drawing. And she looked over my shoulder and she said, You have no artistic ability.

You know, but that's okay. It was 1960s. And so, you know, none of us know and no one knew about, you know, how a horrible thing that they'd be to be done to a person. So I didn't know either, that that was a horrible thing. And I didn't know I didn't care if I wasn't thinking, Oh, that's I just thought that's okay. That's the way it is. And you know, the sky is blue and I have no artistic ability, and that was kind of, you know, but so I didn't really suffer around this but but it did become an identity this kind of label I am this I am of no artistic ability. And so through the rest of school, you know, just there was just the nature of Sky's blue and I've noticed stickability and that's the way it is. Until I came to college my freshman year in college, my roommate in college probably qualifies as a born again artist and evangelistic artist. So he worked on me and to get me converted to the true way. At the end of that first year, I was taking art classes. And that's turned out I had some little bit there. You know enough to have fun and really enjoy doing the art. So there's a label right and we densify so very simple. I am this is something deeper inside of us than pleasure and pain. We can have a lot of suffering around that because generally anything that you say you are number of things can happen. One is that you're not really static. So you know, changing shifting things all the time. And so if your child holding on to I am this way, then that would bump up against reality that's reality is different. Also, if we say I am this, it can be a magnet for all kinds of ideas, cultural ideas, familial ideas, personal experience ideas of what it means to be this particular thing. And it can be quite oppressive sometimes to kind of feel the magnetic pool of all these concepts ideas of all we have to live up to because now I'm this and you know, God, you know, it's lovely for some people to do something like to go some kind of go to some place where our ordinary identities aren't operating. Like, like, you know, to go some people going backpacking in the Sierras being away from people and your job, your role in life, your place your identity system. Don't Don't compute up there, the bears and raccoons don't care now, and so and so it's some some kind of ease and relaxation falls away, and it'd be quite lonely to have this fall away. And then you get back to the parking lot where you left your car and there's people there. And you can sometimes watch the identities going to reemerge and recut recreated. People who do meditation retreats have the same experience. It's lovely to have some of these identities fall away and not count. And then when they come back into their usual life, they can feel it kind of recoat we get we constellated in some societies, like in Japan, they have us is still the case but they used to be public

baths. Japan is a little bit of a stratified society where and class differences and all that but it's quite lovely in Japan that everyone becomes equal in the bath in the bath house. You know, you're all naked and, and so it's a one place you Get a feel what it's like to drop some of the end some of the roles, what goes on. So this stress around you know, the label we have who we are. If you go in closer more deeply, then there's stress around identifying with how our mental activities or mental functioning so for example, our opinions or thoughts, some people are very strongly identified with their thoughts. So much so that I am my thoughts. I think, therefore I am. And the idea of not thinking is frightening to some people because they die they disappear. Some people as the meditation gets quieter and quieter and there's less and less thoughts I find it very challenging and threatening, because their whole identity is built up through the stories and thoughts they tell themselves about who they are. And if they're not telling stories and reliving stories that reinforce, reinforce their idea of who they are who they are. They can be quite disorienting, even frightening. For some people, their sense of safe The security depends on those the thoughts and ideas and concepts and story making that kind of keeps on going. And if you look at your content of your thoughts, what you think about, I think for many people, a high percentage of their thoughts are self referential in nature one way or the other, that, you know, this, you yourself, you yourself are kind of character of your thoughts and stories, conversations you're having your mind. And in some ways, some of that is building and creating and maintaining an identity.

Sometimes thoughts of, you know, delusions of grandeur, or, you know, I'm sitting there and thinking about all the great things you're going to do and all the great plans you're going to do and it's it reinforces a certain self concept to have these thoughts and fantasies and then nothing to do with reality but it's you know, sir seems good to be you know, saving the world. You know, from destruction, you know, whatever, through these grades, you know, that all kinds of whatever thought They might be thoughts come and go. There's stress involved and holding on to these thoughts stress involved in maintaining them, planning and supporting them. And so the if you're not if you're interested in distressing, you want to be able to put these kinds of thoughts down. You don't need them. You don't need to always be thinking about who you are always be maintaining an entity entity. You don't need to be to define yourself by your thoughts, by your opinions, by your intentions, by your impulses by reactions you have inside. Men, many people have a strong strong identity to all of this. Probably, you know, people. No one does this for themselves. But it's very rare that people see that they do it. But many of us know people who are opinionated those people and sometimes when you see it People have strong opinions that they're very identified with their opinions and they're just defending their opinion they're defending themselves in the process. So this is all in Buddhism is called them the kind of mental constructs mental activity and those it's much deeper and therefore more insidious stronger sand place where people identify, but also it creates a lot of stress. And then in this kind of going in closer and closer more intimate, the analysis of Buddhism gives the deepest structure of self or a place we identify myself has to do with consciousness that yes, my body is not myself my feelings are not myself my identities are not you know the names have been labels I get myself or not myself. My mental activities in my thoughts and of myself. All these things are ephemeral. They come and go, they changing all the time. Yes, they don't qualify out who I am, but I'm Really who I am as consciousness, that's really who I am. Now, maybe, but what I've seen is that Dennis and myself and I've seen it and other people than any identifying with consciousness, the very act of identification, the act of holding on to this is who I am, the kind of fixation or kind of orientation it takes to hold that in place and do that is causes a certain degree of stress in the mind. And what happens if we don't create the identity that consciousness is who I am, I proposed my experiences actually, the mind gets lighter conscience is lighter, it is easier that as soon as we make that identity, there's a there's a tightness, a contraction that goes on. I've also known people who get very attached to this idea that consciousness is who they are, and they're kind of annoying to be around. You know, because, you know, they could kind of like a very strong hue kind of Spiritual view they hold on to and they want to convince you that this is who you

really are and who we really are. And it's just kind of in Buddhist get a lot because in Buddhism because of this strange Buddhist concept of no self, not self, you know, and to say nothing is consciousness in itself, then they, you know, people come to come with great fire zeal and it's not explained to you, you know, the conscience really is to sell. Maybe it is maybe it isn't, but the idea that there's gonna be this attachment to it that goes on. So in all this, what I'm trying to do is to point out is that it's not the issue is not whether any of these things are accurate or not, or whether these things are the self or not the self. The main concern is, is there stress involved in identifying any of these areas of our life? Or is there suffering involved in identifying these as the self or taking them as being mine and if you're tuning into the end, But the Buddhist approach is to tune into the stress, if what you want is to be free of that stress tune into where there's suffering, so you can relax and be free of that suffering. And so as a result, then the tendency is to no longer take, get involved get attached to our possessions itself.

Our status is who we really are. Not to get attached to the body is who we really are, our feelings, our labels, our mental activities, and even consciousness, not to take that as this is who I really am. And then to at some point, realize that it's actually most peaceful, to not take anything as myself and so at release in relaxation, that leads us these Buddhist Buddhist, the Buddha say that these things body feelings, labels mental activity, Videos consciousness, they don't really qualify as a reliable self to get attached to and hold on to them. They're not satisfactory, they don't offer a lasting status densifying with identifying with them as being me, doesn't lead to lasting satisfaction and peace. And so the not self teaching in Buddhism is not a teaching that there is no self, but rather a teaching that the body is not a satisfying place to get attached yourself. So it's not to the body is not not the real self. The feelings are not the real self. Your labels about yourself are not the real self. The mental activities you have is not the real self. The conscious is not the real self. So then the question is, who are we really if all those things Don't really qualify as a good place to hang the hat of self. And then the Buddhist said, well, the very question of asking Who are you really? Who's that? What's the true self? is stressful?

And maybe it's not needed? Maybe it's not maybe we don't need to answer the question, Who are you? Maybe there's a kind of freedom that can come without identifying anything as being the true self, who I really am. And then the question is, can you function successfully in the world without, without a very clear attachment or clear sense? This is who I really am. You can if you have a clear sense of being in your body and know what's going on in your body, you can if you have a clear sense of what Your the experiences of pleasure and pain that goes on in the body. They're very important those experiences they're kind of teachers for us and help us understand better what's going on. We can if we have a clear sense of the labels and perceptions we have in our mind, we can if we have very clear mindfulness of what goes on, in our thoughts in our impulses in our intentions, it helps to have very clear sense of something that's called consciousness or awareness, and how it operates and how it's here. It's possible to function we need to have more we are clearly aware of how these things operate and are connected to them. The more successful we can operate in the world. And the more we kind of be aware of the world and more we know ourselves well we can track ourselves we can monitor ourselves, we can connect to our intentions, and our wisdom, our compassion, and with connected to all these things. is not really so important that we have a clear idea of who we really are as a self. We can be free of self preoccupation that way, but possessiveness that way, with strong identification that way. We might have identities that we live by. But there's a difference between identities and identification. identification is an action that the mind makes. We identify the verb, we're identifying with something. And identities are something we have. So I can I have an identity of being a man usually, but I can identify with being a man, and that adds a lot, a lot of extra stuff on top of it, because then I'm actively involved in that creating and making that identity. So the Buddhist approach is that it's possible to live in the world. Much More successfully, much more happily and peacefully without picking up this

idea of this is the self. And so the way this is worded in Buddhism is not by not saying that there is no self. And so this so you don't have to argue with anyone that you know, defend or criticize Buddhism for saying there's no self. The Buddha is very particular it says, certain things that we can experience and be present for, or don't qualify or can't be characterized, used to characterize this is who I really am. So the teaching is not self teaching. The body is not self. Feelings are not self labels are not self. mental activities are not self consciousness, not self. And then relax. It makes sense so I hope that makes some sense, I hope that did more to clarify than make it more complicated. And but the one thing that I wanted to get across, which I've said twice already, I think, and that is that the starting point is not the philosophic philosophy about what is not is not the self. But rather the entry point to this whole conversation is to recognize where this suffering the stresses, and if you start there, then a very different path is taken. And it's a path that will help you find how to suffer less than less around the whole notion of self. And if at the end of that path, you do identify our true self. This is you truly are and now you know for sure. Don't get attached to it, because then you'll suffer.

And then finally, I know said finally many how many times I say finally thing. I find that this process of mindfulness that helps us to shed all these unnecessary attachments to self that goes on is a very generous thing to do to yourself. It's like a gift to yourself. Because in the end of doing it, you get to be more yourself. When we identify anything as being myself, we actually limit ourselves and become less. But when we paradoxically, when we let go of self concepts and self identities, we actually can radiate and shine more who we actually are. There's not no inhibition, there's no definition. There's no boundaries, there's no putting ourselves in a box. So rather than losing yourself being diminished, by this teachings of not self, it's actually a form of being enhanced, kind of being Fuller. A person, but it's safe because you're not going to get conceited from being more yourself, you'll just be okay, I should stop. Thank you.