

# 2017-01-09 The Understanding of The Buddhas Teaching On Atta

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

suffering, people, buddha, alternative, conceit, world, idea, imperceptible, ata, clinging, holding, soul, buddhism, suffer, teaching, interested, stressed, talking, support, ease

## SPEAKERS

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About the Buddhist teaching that's known as not self, sometimes, popularly, popularly, it's known as non self, or no self. But that's a little bit of a mis translation of the original. And it's one of the more well known perplexing teachings of Buddhism, especially when people do say there's no self. And so I thought that I would try to cover a little bit for you, with your way. And the idea is that it's meant to be a very practical teaching, and practical for the purposes of not being us stressed, suffer distressed, by the whole kind of ways in which people hold self, not self, the whole kind of concept that swirls around this whole self thing. And I want to start by talking a little bit more the background of these teachings in ancient India, how it was back then, and then bring it into something as more practical, and the alternative to the whole selfing concern that the Buddha was addressing. So the, the word that's translated as self, when you translate from the ancient Indian language of the Buddha, to the modern world, is the word atta, a t t a. And in Sanskrit, it's atman. Some of you've heard the term it there. And that word, atta has two meanings. One of the meanings is it's a simple, innocent, reflexive pronoun, meaning you say, myself, yourself, ourselves. And so we start by myself, then you can use the word Otto is just a simple, you know, reference, you know, over here. And there's no no metaphysical, no. You know, meaning to the term, just simply, you know, you know, my name is Gil, and does Gil really exist, or does he not exist? Or what's How does guild exist? That's independent of, you know, that's a whole other question whether, then the question of what do people usually call me? And what names do I respond my way, you know, if you say, if you What name? Can you say that you get my attention, I call it look up and say yes, so just you know, so my name is say, My name is Gil, and, you know, and so that my eyes sometimes atta. And so not much to be made of it. And there's some wonderful statements that Buddha makes using that simple pronoun. He says, Don't give yourself away to someone else. Don't become a slave to someone else in the ancient world, but don't give yourself away. It also, as I said, Make an island onto yourself. Make a refuge of yourself be make be a refuge onto your own self. So just kind of take care of yourself, be responsible for yourself, live in such a way that you are protected by yourself that you are at home and yourself that you're a refuge here. And that just kind of means, you know, take care of yourself. And there's, you know, many things that only you can do for yourself, no one else can do it for you. And you we kind of expect that hopefully, you'll, you know, do it for yourself, like peeing, you don't ask other people to do it for you. You know, and so, you know, even if you have to use a diaper, you still, you know, you're not asking anybody else to do it for you, that being just, you know, you do the peeing. And it's kind of you don't have a metaphysical self, you don't have this grand theories about what the self really is, you know, if you say, you know, I gotta go pee, you know, that's, you know, which self is being and is there a real self, and I've heard there is no self in Buddhism. So, you know, I'm not really responsible for my peeing and you know it because, you know, it just, you know, you're responsible for that.

So that's pretty basic. And so there's a lot of things which are not as basic as that, that you're responsible for, and then taken care of, and so, you can take that complex of things which are exist here and thing that you can call this name of yours. And you can it can become a refuge. It's a beautiful thing. It's in the support. It's something meaning four place to rest and be at home. And what it is that's not so interesting at this point. So let's go to the innocent use of the word *atta* of self myself. When the Buddha was differentiating himself, from the people who believed in an *atta*, an *ottoman* is a metaphysical entity, then we translate into English with a capital S, the self. And even then it might be a little bit difficult in English to appreciate what this is because we use the word self so easily in English. And it has so many different meanings and has so much importance in psychology in different places. And it's probably the word *atta* is probably better translated as soul. If we don't understand the soul as being a particular, like in the West, sometimes we have the idea that each person has a particular unique soul, it's different for everybody else. The *Atman* is a universal essence, that all beings equally have. And it's not nothing personal about at all, but it resides as an essence within us. And so that idea of a permanent abiding essence is sometimes in the environment of the Buddha, some religious people were calling the *Ottoman*. And the purpose of the religious life was to realize that true essential self that's permanent. And they had a lot of different theories about the nature of this *Atman* itself, what it might be the soul. But the ones that the Buddha had the most contact with their swirling around him at his time, is that this essential soul thing is imperceptible, it cannot be perceived, but it's permanent, and always there. And it's the true self. And if you can realize that imperceptible to itself, that then there's bliss and happiness, and everything is great. And that's the purpose, of course, is to attain that. And the people who believe that same time believed that what you could perceive in the world doesn't really qualify us that essential self. The Buddha was saying I don't, I'm not interested in that whole philosophy, that approach. And, in fact, that whole idea of an imperceptible essential, true, permanent self, to be concerned with that and interested in that, it does not lead to liberation. And what the Buddha was interested in was liberation from suffering, liberation from clinging from the contractions of the heart. So it's a very pragmatic purpose, something that's perceivable that belongs to the world of experience here. And now, you can experience if it hurts if you suffer, if you're stressed if you're a contracted and tight, and you can experience what it's like to be free of that. Whether there is or is not an imperceptible enduring self, the Buddha found to be an irrelevant issue for this pragmatic concern, of freedom. Now, that's maybe a religious point of view. And it's different than, you know, other Indian ideas and, and, you know, just just so in the Buddhist talked about something is not self. He was generally talking about it, it's not the soul. But in doing that, he was the teaching actually, something very similar to the other people who said that in the precept, world of perception, which you can see and experience, none of that is the self, the soul, your body, your feelings, your emotions, your thoughts, your consciousness, because you can be aware of them, none of them qualifies this thing, this, this, the, the, the SL for the capitalist.

What the Buddha did, it was a little different than the others. So that time was he did not then posit that there is some essential soul. He left that part out. He just wasn't interested in that. It was enough for him to know that nothing here qualified as the soul. Therefore, people who work trying to hold on to it and cling to it some kind of permanent sense of safety, permanent sense of like they're right, they, they kind of permanent kind of transcending of the world, because they had to attain this imperceptible self. You kind of have to leave the perceptible world. And go into a kind of altered transcendent state. And so he that wasn't interesting for him, he was interested in freedom in this world that we live in. And so if you took anything in this world as that self, it was just more clinging and attachment. So the Buddha was for these people who are caught up in this idea. And apparently many people must have been, because he spent a lot of time talking about this is not self, this is not self, this is not self. And so his teaching is about not what's not self. And if you attach to your body as the self, or as your essential

being, and you hear this instruction is not self, then if you're inclined to, you might let go of that. clinging, if you're told the feelings are not that self, in you let go of that, then you relax that clinging. If you're told that your perceptions are not self, you're relaxed, that you're told that your mental thoughts, mental activities and intentions are not self, and you're relaxed, that holding on. And if you're told that you're conscious is not self, then you might relax that idea of self. And after a while, you're pretty relaxed. You know, use your hands, open your hand, you're, you're relaxed, and everything. But if you're not attached to this idea of a soul, or essentially, you're not even concerned about it, some of you have never even heard about this Indian idea before. And so, you know, it's not quite relevant tea for you, unless you kind of extend and interpret this idea into a different context, like the western context. And so it's very common for Western teachers, to expand the notion of self, to be all kinds of other ideas of self, they're not the same as this ancient idea of the soul. And it gets a little bit confusing exactly what they're talking about, then, because usually, it's not so well defined. And it can lead lead to all kinds of complications. And one of them is that if you start saying too much, that there is no cell for it, this is not self, this is not self or something, you know, ordinary than ordinary identities, get confused, like what, you know, I'm not supposed to see myself as, you know, some kind of identity. And then we have this problem in our society that some people's selves are denied, you know, you know, you know, you don't really account somehow and you're not supposed to be yourself, you're supposed to, you know, and so some people have are, and some people are attached to being either suffer, because they're not allowed to be yourself not allowed to be who they are, or they're somehow attached to not wanting to be themselves something, they kind of like want to be invisible and, you know, count. So sometimes this Buddhist teachings on itself, doesn't do enough justice, to the possibility of living a life of powerful confidence that we are here and we can establish self and be dignified and valued. And I'm unapologetic, undefended, latest here, in a clear, strong, confident way. And that we want to support people to have that ability. And when people hear too much teachings of no self, no self, no self, like they get the class are shrinking, and like, you know, they're not supposed to kind of show up and be. So what is his teachings? So anyway, so this idea of not self, in the original context, had a lot to do with something to do with soul. kind of idea. But the Buddha had another set of teaching. And to get to the, that's related, but it's different. And there's a bit closer to the psychological understanding that many of us feel comfortable with. But to get to and I'd like to point to what the Buddha said was an alternative way of approaching your life, then looking for a soul or an essential self or the true essential being of who we are.

That an alternative perspective and that is to be interested in noticing. What isn't it how it relates to the talk I gave last Monday about the Four Noble Truths. be interested in and where you're suffering or where you're stressed or where your field unease. Buddhists stop for suffering. They're interested in it. There. They think it's valuable to stop and notice when we're suffering and Buddhist in a certain kind of wonderful, dedicated, maybe, maybe happy way or something. They're kind of intolerant of it, meaning they're not willing to put up with it. We're not learning to be Buddhist to suffer better, you know, accept your suffering, and just like, you know, you'll figure out how to be at ease with your suffering. And, you know, you'd sit, you know, just suffering after all, and there's no self, so, you know, no one's suffering. So, you know, it's not a problem, and just suffering. And so, but there is, you know, the heart of Buddhism is this, knowing this potential of not suffering, and moving in that direction, having that is kind of the North Star that, that's supports us. And so to do that, there has to be a realistic assessment and recognition and tuning into suffering, not to suffer better, but to kind of, be able to go through it to the other side. And then to be interested in suffering, and to be interested in the cause of suffering, the clinging, the attachment that bring brings it about, so that we can learn how to let go of the attachment, the craving, that brings our suffering, can let go of some of the, the our contribution to the way we contract or tighten up or become stressed or become somehow, you know, caught up in, in clinging. And then to let go of that, to free it. The result of that is a to do it thoroughly and well, is to enter into a

path of happiness and well being of ease and peace, because we begin letting go of the forces that bring about suffering. And as we develop this ease, it comes with developing this strong sense of awareness, strong sense of subtleness. And then stability here and now. strong sense of self monitoring and self awareness. What that comes with, is a dropping away of forces that have things that are debilitating for us. It turns out that things like being shy, is not a nothing, you're not doing nothing, when we're shy. It's an activity of the mind to be shy, something's going on, that makes us shy, we don't, you know, and so if the mind settles and is deeply relaxed, and the activity of shyness is not there, then the person is not conceited, that is not it's not then puffed up or, or assertive. They're just there in a strong way. If you let go of kind of conceited pride, you don't end up as a you know, as a couch potato or so nobody, you end up with someone who's just there again, upright, unapologetic, on assertive in some kind of conceited way, just there in a strong way right to look at reality directly in the eye. And so, the idea is, as we let go of these forces of clinging and relaxation, we come into a balanced place, or into homeostasis, around not needing to assert an identity in a forceful way to prove ourselves to make ourselves something to force other people to see a certain way or, or to apologize for ourselves. We don't have to disappear and pretend we don't exist. We can just be there in a clear, direct full way. I remember many years ago, I was we had a meeting here at IMC about 12 years ago, of a group of Buddhist teachers who had been teachers who've been Buddhist practitioners. By that time, let's see, some 30 35 years.

So they'd been practicing for a long time and senior teachers who've been Abbott's have different temples around and it was just a kind of private gathering to talk about Dharma and stuff. And in the course of that, sitting around a circle talking someone asked what are your challenges these days? What are your personal challenges? And they went around and they talked about personal, psychological, familial, different challenges. They have challenged me to talk about challenges they have with the practice of Buddhism itself. And it was, in some ways, some of that stuff was kind of in the ordinary But many people have. And so, you know, maybe a little bit surprising that they had ordinary challenges, like, you know that you're all those years of practice. But what was remarkable was the ease and relaxation, in which they talked about it. They were not defensive. They were not embarrassed. They were not. They didn't feel bad about themselves for being this way, they didn't feel like at the height, it, they didn't feel, you know, there was a, they didn't kind of think of themselves as a bad Buddhist, you know, I'm not doing it right, you know, I'm doing it wrong. And after all these years, I should have been doing better. And they just like, they've kind of smiled and relaxed. And to think, you know, when I remember one person said, you know, I've been giving these Dharma talks for so long. And you know, every time before I give a Dharma talk, I'm still nervous. And the previous day was smile, and, you know, like, open and, like, just, this is the way it is. And I thought that was quite remarkable. The ease and relaxation, there was an added suffering on top of it. The So, to come to a place to practice and come to a place of some kind of deep ease, or well being, or peace, to know that, even if it's just a short while to know it really deeply, and then have that as a reference for how to go through our life. As opposed to using the idea of me, myself and mine. What's mine, it's mine, this is who I am, this is me, and you better, you know, take me into account, I need praise, I need lots of praise. And if I don't get enough praise, someone's going to pay. That's how, you know, that's, that's the live life. Well, you get to praise, thank you. But you know, or, you know, if I don't get enough praise, then I think I should blame someone you know, you know, that's really you know, and play the whole praise and blame game. That's sad, it's painful for oneself. And for others, that's not a nice place to live in. If you don't know, a place of peace and ease, that's an alternative to that, then it might be easy to succumb to that old praise and blame game because that's all you know, you feel like you're safer, or you have energy or more alive or you you account you have value, if you're praised. But if you have a deep abiding sense of confidence, and well being just for breathing just for being alive, then you know, that's so much better than the praise and blame game. It's just not interesting to go there. Praise and blame has a lot to do with self concept, self ideas. And so the alternative to being caught up in these

kinds of ideas, is to have a sense of well being. So it's in that spirit, and that kind of approach, that the Buddha then addressed a lot of the ways in which people suffer around their concepts of self. It wasn't to criticize something, but rather to point to something that's so much better. And so, what he did talk about a lot was the suffering that comes from seeing identifying things holding on to things as this is mine. This is mine. This is who I am. And this is myself. And what that what these these terms mean, this is mine has to do with issues of possession. This is my thing.

And so we can certainly have material things that we possess, but then sometimes it's our opinions. You know that and my opinions are really important to have it's very important that my opinions are known, how I'm seen by other people have valued is based on my opinions. And so or my stories, or my you know, there's things that that are you know, are mine, my my clothes, you know, I am my clothes. So my clothes are really important is important. Everyone see me with wearing these, you know, important clothes that I wear, or my car or my spouse, you know, better than me I, you know, I'm seeing through the filter of my spouse and that's how I get identified. And so there's a lot of suffering around possession or taking things as mine and One of the exercises that I think is kind of interesting is that look at this issue of mine is many of you left, many of you have put your shoes in a shoe rack here today. And if we all went back at home with different shoes, and we came with our shoes wouldn't care.

And the idea of its, you know, your shoe, you know, is interesting, you know, it's helpful. It's, you know, we want you to go home and not get, you know, cramped feet, because you're using too small shoes falling out of your shoes. There's a wonderful photograph of Zen master named Suzuki Roshi, who lived in San Francisco. And photograph is of him leaning forward with his glasses, he's holding up his glasses about a foot away from his face, and he's leaning forward. And coincidentally, his photograph was taken, just as he was saying something, he was holding up his glasses to show people. And he said, these glasses are not my glasses. But you know about my tired old eyes. So you allow me to use them? In my glasses, you know, stay away, you know, very different feeling. So the whole idea of mine is a very interesting area to look at. And there's a lot of suffering around it. And is there an alternative way of being in the world that honors ourselves takes care of ourselves that, you know, we can have things so that we don't suffer around them. And some people like to say that the things I have or lent to me, but you bought them, yeah, but you know, they're all alone. And if I, if I see them as being alone, then actually go through the world with more ease, and have to go through this as mine that to protect it. And then maybe told the story recently, but I'll say it again. Good number of years ago, it might have been like the one of the first smartphones on the market, or just like the history for this, what we call now smartphones, but like something it was almost as good. They had some kind of fun was very expensive. I think it was over \$1,000 or something back then. And there was a Buddhist monk, who is renunciant, who's supposed to have any money, not supposed to have you know, well. And I saw him and he had one of these back then, you know, kind of like state of the art very expensive. phones, like I said, I said, What are you doing? Your renunciant? And you should know, what are you doing with such a wealthy, expensive thing. And he said, Oh, someone gave it to me. And I figured it was okay for me to have it. As long as if someone asked me for it, I'd give it to them. So for a moment, I was tempted.

And but yeah, so my offering is just different is different ways of holding it and seeing it that, you know, it's the whole idea that this is mine is an important area of suffering. And so to break up the hold of the existing attitudes of possession that you have, just another way of holding it was one of the things that the Buddha was pointing to. So this is mine. The other is, is this is who I am. And this is understood in the tradition, to be the suffering of conceit. And so and so this is where we assume and hold on to we cling to some identity, often in relationship to other people. And in English, we often think of conceit as thinking that you're better than they were better than someone else. But in Buddhism, the idea of conceit is of three types. There's the conceit that you're superior to someone else. There's also the



conceit that you're inferior to someone else. And people can hold on to that just as strongly, just as strongly as the idea that you're superior. The third kind of conceit is the conceit that you're equal to others. So what's the alternative? I mean, in America where we're supposed to all be, there's a kind of an ideal in America, that we're all supposed to be equal. And I saw a great documentary this weekend, called inequality for all And it's a Robert reight, his documentary about the economist who's talking about income inequality in America, I thought it was a great documentary. But this is, you know, I think he's playing with this idea of equality for all is the goal, right, but actually a lot of inequality. So the idea of equality is also why it's a problem in Buddhism is that it's still playing the self game, measuring yourself against other people. And so what the Buddha says, there's an alternative to conceit, when recording onto some idea, even the idea that we're all equal. And that is, you don't play the self game, you don't play the conceit game, you don't play the comparison game, you're just there, in a confident, assured, stable way, as if you belong here. And that you're, and you're able to offer that to other people to you look upon them, see if they're there, and you allow them to be there in a, in a way they feel safe and open and present. And not not, you don't have to see them through the lens of your comparison and your conceit, and better and worse, then, just they're allowed to be. So the whole idea of conceit, there's lots of conceits that people have, which cause suffering. The third form of self is his word, the word is this is myself. That's the suffering of views of philosophies. And everyone, in some ways, is a philosopher in some way that they have sometimes often some kind of inherited or developed from our culture, or society or thoughts, some idea of what the true self is. And then some people suffer around that people do a lot of meditation, a common kind of clinging, is that awareness is the self, that consciousness is really who we are. And so the Buddha said that there's a lot of suffering around this holding on to some view and philosophy. And now I know who the self is, I want to know what the true self is. And so to notice that suffering, and knowing alternative is part of the function of Buddhism, an alternative of peace that doesn't require having the answer to know what the true self is. So that option operating principle here is that there. If you if you're tuning into suffering, you're sensitive to when it occurs, then you'll notice that there's unease or suffering or stress, when there is some kind of attachment around mind. The fact that you say, take something as mine could be innocent and normal, it's going to be helpful to other people, if you say, no, it is, it's mine, someone you know, you know, you know, if you, you know, if you, you know, he left your shoes in the shoe rack, and you go out and someone's unsure which choose yours, and which is yours, and you say, well, that's mine over there. do them a favor, you know, sounds like you, I'm attached to my shoes, it's just like mine. It's easy, it's innocent. But to be sensitive to suffering, then we can feel when we're stressed or tight or contracted around what's mine.

And then the point of Buddhist practice is to discover the alternative to that, how to live without that suffering. If we're sensitive to suffering, we notice how the suffering of conceit when there's suffering around identity and comparison with other people, some comparisons, okay. Someone today told me, asked me, can you get that from up above pull it down? Because you're so much taller than me? That's a comparison. You know, I'm the tall and the person who was a shorter person. That could be there's no, doesn't have to be a problem with that. Or there can be a lot of problem with that. There's a lot of suffering and our society around the height for some people. Today, it was innocent, but you know, tuned into the suffering around it, and the suffering people have, then we can start think addressing and finding what's the alternative to it. And then the suffering of the views or philosophy ideas of this is my true self. If we're sensitive to the suffering of it, then we can look for the alternative. And if you know the alternative, if you've had an experience of deep abiding sense of well being and peace and confidence and presence that's meaningful that's nourishing that supportive, that is supportive of helping other people. feel safe and other people feel at ease and supported, then you're, you know, something, you know, a treasure. And then you can kind of begin kind of evoking that or coming back to that or working towards that, or doing the kind of really good inner work of looking at yourself and dressing where you're attached to try to understand what's going on, looking to kind of understand the conditions that

are operating, looking for learn how to let go, looking to how to move into an alternative. And then the game is beginning to find a different way of living. A living that doesn't, is not founded, on conceits of me myself in mind. It doesn't do away with thoughts of me, myself or mine, but our life is not based on it. It's just we use it as a convenience, to get around and kind of find our way better. So the ancient teaching of not itself, as it was taught in the ancient world, is maybe not so relevant for a good number of people who come to Buddhism in the West, how its translated or interpreted in the West, is often much more interesting, much more useful. But it's not a one to one correspondence with the way the Buddha taught. But one way to kind of get to is from the Buddhist way he taught, is to get to it through his teachings of understanding the suffering around. This is mine, this is myself, this is this is who I am. And this is myself, the self the issue of possession around self, the issue of conceit around self and the issue of philosophy of views around self. And chances are that if you tune into suffering, if there's issues around self, that would be helpful for you to address, you'll get to know them in this way, that if you go, I've been told that if you're a nature photographer, and you go to the Grand savannahs of Africa, and you want to take photographs of many animals, you don't want to go racing around the savanna looking for them, you go to the watering hole, and you're such as up there. And most of those animals sooner or later will come to the watering hole. And you can get take pictures of them. So all the important issues that you really need to address for your safety and your peace and your well being and the spiritual well being and freedom. All the issues you have to address will come to you. If you sit at the watering hole of suffering. That's how you identify the issues that need to be addressed. So you know, don't don't suffer to suffer more. Wake up, pay attention. Don't kind of be so distracted and so busy that you don't notice, when you feel some unease.

When you feel somebody needs some stress, something that's your teacher, that's your where you can find your way forward. And if you do that, then from time to time, you will discover that some of your suffering has its roots in issues of identity issues or conceit, issues of possessiveness, issues of you know, these views that we hold. And then maybe you'll be interested in alternative and living the alternative. I hope that you live in a confident, assured, dignified way, where you understand that you and everyone else, as are worthy and valuable beings to be loved and cared for and respected. because it'd be really great to live in a world where there's mutual respect, mutual admiration, mutual support, and mutual love. And that's one of the alternatives to the whole issue of self and self thing which causes so much suffering. So I hope that I hope this made a little bit of sense of this ancient teaching and case made some sense of it. And if it's too complicated don't make yourself out of your confusion. Thank you