

Dharmette: Insight (26) Self as Tension

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July 28, 2025

Keywords: samādhi, insight meditation, anicca, dukkha, anattā, not-self, me-myself-mine, tension, Dharma practice, self-referential thinking

So good day, everyone. Hello and welcome to this continuation of a series of talks on Insight, the Insight of Insight Meditation that followed a longer series on *samādhi*. And that is, all this builds to deepening and deepening insight. And there are three primary insights that our tradition gives the most emphasis on. The insight into change, how everything is changing all the time. Insight into suffering, stress, tension. And then insight into not self.

And the teachings on self, not self, can be quite challenging for many people. Many people don't understand it, or it's disturbing, or some people think it's ridiculous the way it's presented. And so I want to take our time to introduce you this idea. It's meant to be a simple, practical idea, this teaching of not-self, that is not trying to introduce any ideas to you, is not trying to overlay some belief system on you, but is supposed to be something that you somehow, in some certain kind of way, see for yourself. Oh, you'll see something about self, not self that stands out obvious to you. You don't have to, it's not a matter of having to believe it, it's you have your own insight that maybe is very meaningful for you to see and maybe even satisfying to see.

So we'll get into this over these next days. But for today, I would like to suggest that something more kind of simple and maybe a little bit more, not meant to be the final word, but rather kind of introductory word, maybe kind of as a... kind of a general statement that gets us into the territory of what we're going to look at. And that is kind of the flippant, or kind of cartoonish definition of self. That self, someone asks, what is self? And someone else answers, tension. Self is tension.

Of course, not always tension. But a great majority of the time, when people are involved in self, with not-self, with no-self, with all-self, whatever kind of idea of self that goes on, chances are high that there is tension involved. The Buddha said that there's no doctrine of self, no

philosophy of what the self is, that is not without *dukkha*. And for today I'll call that tension. That is not without some kind of tension. And that Dharma practice has less to do with deciding or determining what is or is not the self, as it is becoming free of tension associated with self and not self.

The way we hold it, the way we relate to it. And so, as we get into this topic of not-self, we're building on a meditation practice we've been doing, the teachings we've been doing over these now more than six months, that have to do with settling the mind, becoming very calm and peaceful, knowing how to relax deeply, and knowing how to see clearly what's happening here and now in the present moment. And then with that, not using that to indulge in, to bask in calm or peace, but rather use that as a foundation, whatever degree of calm you have, to become more sensitive to the tension that goes on deep in the mind and deep in the heart. And the tension associated with me, myself and mine, the tension associated with ideas of who I am, identities that I have and holding on to and defending and championing and expressing, that there's no dismissing of anything, any idea of self, any sense of self, feeling of self, but rather freeing ourselves from any tension that's associated with it. That is a radical thing.

And so what that takes is to become sensitive to tension around self. And one of the places to see that is in thinking. For most people, a high percentage of their thoughts are self-referential. And we're having conversations with someone, or we're considering what happened, and he said, she said, they said, or we are planning what we're going to do, and we're remembering what we did do. We're evaluating ourselves, monitoring ourselves, criticizing ourselves. You know, we're kind of like the main subject of our thoughts, more often than not.

And even if they're not the... Self is not the center of what we're thinking about, the way that we're involved in other thoughts, we bring a kind of self-along, the self that has to be right, the self that has to be perfect, the self that has to be responsible, the self that is somehow being pushed around by the world and trying to defend ourselves. There's often a self involved, one way or the other, some idea, some feeling, some intuition. And the task right now, if you're willing or interested, is to not become a philosopher of self, not kind of try to defend it or build it or have some idea of what the self is, but rather to become highly sensitive to the tension that comes along with that. The contraction, the pressure. Sometimes it's whatever that tension or stress or pressure might be, qualifies to be called suffering.

It hurts. It's kind of like a painful, the painful self. And to feel the tension... And then don't be so concerned about the cause of the tension, the subject of your thinking. Just tune into

the tension so that the tension becomes a little bit liberated from what is triggering the tension, the belief, the ideas of me, myself, and mine. Just feel the tension almost as a physical phenomenon.

And see if you can relax it, soften. Let it kind of melt into the atmosphere around you, or let it kind of gently start draining. Sometimes I think of tension as being like a ball on a hillside, and it's being held back. And if you release the holding back, the tension is the holding back of the ball. If you let go of that tension of holding it back, then it rolls down the hill, and it opens up and relaxes. And so I would recommend, if you're interested, as kind of homework for the next 24 hours, is to become a connoisseur of the tension that is associated with anything to do with me, myself, and mine.

What is mine, who I am, about my experience. It could be very subtle, just the sense of being the experiencer, being the doer. Even simple, seemingly innocent ideas like that often will come with tension. And the more we're actually actively thinking, actively doing with, propelled by that self, chances are there more tension we have. The more we're thinking about the same thing over and over again, where we're the subject in the thoughts, the chances are there's more tension underlying that. It might be tension you feel behind the forehead, somewhere in the brain between the ears. It might be in the face. It might be in the hands or the belly, the chest. But feel the tension.

And maybe as you do this, to feel the tension with the background or the foreground, or whatever calm or peace or lack of tension you feel somewhere in your body. And maybe there are some places where it's relatively easy to soften, relax, calm, and to feel that. Sometimes people carry tension in their hands, in their fingers. And sometimes because that's an easier place to just kind of open and soften and relax the hand. Maybe even putting the hand on a surface so it's being supported. And that calm of an intense hand can become the reference point for other places that it's not so easy to relax. Look for a reference point, look for places where you can be free of tension.

And in the meantime, do not worry, do not be concerned with, is there a self or is there no self? Is it a good Buddhist is not supposed to have a self, but that doesn't make any sense. And so there's tension around all this, all these kinds of ideas of self. Like, don't be involved in them more than being concerned or interested how there's tension in that involvement, in that concern. And so provisionally, if someone asks you what is the self in Buddhism? Maybe if it doesn't seem to offend them or confuse them, you can say, it's tension. Sometimes I've thought of self as wind drag. It's like putting out your hand or any kind of flat object that's wind drag for a car or a boat and slowing it down. And self is wind drag, self is tension. Yeah.

And whether that's true or not, it's a nice reference point for helping us understand how much wind drag, how much tension we carry with this idea of self. So I hope you enjoy this. I hope this helps you to have a calmer way of being in the world, more peaceful. And I look forward to continuing this tomorrow.