

Dharmette: Insight (29) Awareness with the Overlay of Self

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So hello and welcome to this series of talks on insight. There are three major insights. We're in the middle of exploring the insight into not-self, but we're not really addressing that directly this week. We're preparing the ground for it. I think that when we go too quickly to try to explain the Buddhist teachings on not-self, too much gets left out. It becomes a little bit too reductionalistic.

It's a profound insight, the insight into not-self, but it occurs in a wider context of experience, a wider context of understanding that is useful to have first. So I'm trying to offer this over this week. Today's emphasis is how often we over-complicate our experience when we bring or apply or assert or interpret it through the lens of me, myself, and mine, through the lens of I, my identity. This says something about me. I'm the one who is. And how will other people think of me now?

There's a lot of self-referencing that goes on. One of the big kind of surprises and powerful insights around this that I had, and which I've talked about before, so bear with me, was that when I was living in Japan, I was living in a Japanese Zen monastery only with Japanese men. In the monastery, there was maybe one or two people who spoke English. So everything was in Japanese, and if I wanted to speak to people, I had to speak in my partial Japanese the best I could. At some point even the abbot forbade the people who spoke English from speaking with me in English. Kaneki wanted me to learn Japanese.

I enjoyed being there. I enjoyed my efforts to speak Japanese. But one of the big surprises is that in Japanese, one very rarely uses the word I or me. It's understood, and sometimes you don't use the word you or we even. Pronouns are not used very much. But that's understood in context who the sentence is applied to.

So there's no need to say, you know, I'm thinking something. One would say, you know, someone asks you, you know, like, what are you thinking? They would say, what are the thoughts kind of pointing towards you? The reply would be, so and so are the thoughts I'm having. So and so is the thinking. So is the thoughts. So and so are the thinking. Everyone understands that in reply to the question, it's self-referential, but you don't use the words self-referential. If you do use the word self, they have an English I. In English, it's so easy. It's a single syllable. In Japanese, it's three syllables, but you need a kind of preposition following it. So it's watashi wa. So it's a mouthful, in a sense. And so it's rather than I.

What I saw when I started speaking Japanese, I was trying to speak it as an English speaker. I would start so many of my sentences with this extended word, watashi wa, because in English we often start that way. At least I did. But in Japanese, it just started to stand out and highlight how odd that was, how disharmony it was to keep referring to that over again. No one corrected me, but I could hear it, you know, that it was not needed, it kept kind of the focus on a particular way, it kind of reified me, myself, and mine. I became kind of the focus of attention, I became the center of attention, at least for myself as I was speaking.

When I started to learn to not say that big word, watashi wa, it wasn't dramatic, but there was a more sense of ease, more sense of openness, more sense of, I wasn't the center of my own attention. I wasn't so as important in a way that was kind of wind drag, kind of contraction and narrowing of the situation and narrowing of myself even. I saw how much I did that. Also, by living in the Japanese community so intimately, working, we all slept in the same room, we ate together, we took breaks together, we meditated together, we were kind of really immersed in that community. I also saw how deeply the way that they, the Japanese monks that was there, that they kind of knew themselves was integrally part of the community.

I first really saw this clearly when I was working, we were all working together, we had a kind of period every day, where we worked all together kind of as a, I wouldn't say a team, but we all worked together doing the same kind of cleaning activity. At some point I saw how clearly they were all working, not exactly as a team, I would say, but as a unit, as an organism. I was working as an individual. I was working as an independent operator. I didn't feel like one was better than the other or one was right and one was wrong. It was just different ways in which societies have organized themselves in order to kind of get along and make things work.

I had grown up in individualist culture, and they were growing up in a collectivist culture. They both have their strengths, they both have their weaknesses. But to see how it operates kind of broke the hegemony for me of the individualism of me, myself, and mine. I saw that it was conditional, it was contingent, it was situational, it was learned, rather than it was

inherent in the universe that this is how I'm supposed to be.

So as we practice insight meditation, the movement is towards simpler and simpler knowing of the present moment experience. As we do that, at some point we feel how the assertion of self, the assumption of self, measuring things, thinking about things in relationship to self, me, myself and mine, my identity, that it's not like we're doing away with those things, not denying that those have a place. But we start seeing how frequently they make the situation more complicated than it needs to be. There's a simpler, cleaner, more peaceful way of experiencing. A sound is just a sound. A taste is just a taste. A sight is just a sight. A thought is just a thought.

We could feel, and this is the power of mindfulness, we can feel, see when the idea of self, me, myself and mine, is a wind drag, is a resistance, is a tension, is a narrowing of attention. When it's actually the opposite, there's ways of very innocently using the word I, me, mine, that has no glue in it, has no tension in it, has no baggage with it, and it's just very loose and light and open. It's okay to use the word, but it's not this baggage. What I've learned is that using the word I, or living with the assumption of me, myself, and I, the selfing that we do, is often not so innocent, because using the word I is a magnet for all kinds of other assumptions, beliefs, conditionings, memories, around what this I is. If we could be innocent and simple with the word I, so many of our problems will drop away. But it's rare that that happens because of this magnetic emphasis or this contraction around this word, which is often invisible.

The benefit of sitting quietly in meditation, mindfulness meditation, is we can start seeing how this works and we can see how the peace that's possible, the simplicity that's possible to allow each thing that we experience to be its own pristine experience. Without the overlay of identity, without the overlay of, this is mine, this says something about me, I have to do something, I, I, I, I. My life is hard for me. This is one more time. It's showing me how difficult my life is. I have to keep, I have to do something about this. I, I, I, I just, it's to watch the regularity, the frequency in which we think and feel. I, I, I, I. To really see it can be exhausting. Wow. But to see there is an alternative. Very simple alternative.

Pain, just pain. Joy, just joy. Thinking, just a thought. Feeling, just a feeling. Love, just love. Generosity, just generosity. Then what follows is whether there needs to be action, there needs to be something done. What follows is maybe also... It doesn't have to come with self. It's just generosity, the desire to give a present, getting up to get the present, coming back, handing it. There's still a chance for choice, for movement, for activity, to take care of things. Of course, in some simple, innocent way, I'm the one who went to get the gift and came back and gave it. But it's very peaceful to operate without glomming on the self, everything we do,

measuring everything against how other people will see it, react to it, believe it, what it says about me, what I'm trying to prove.

The simplicity of experience, without needing to add a self, me and myself and mine. This is one of the great joys of mindfulness practice. It's not addressing the question whether there is or is not a self. It's just saying, it's a wonderful thing, a freeing thing, to live in a simpler way where self is not asserted and overlaid all the time. So, thank you. And so we have one more day on this kind of foundational, laying the foundation for next week where there is a little bit more directly the topic of not self. Thank you.