

Dharmette: Insight (30) Alternative to Self Preoccupation

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So hello and welcome to this fifth talk on the Insight into Not Self. And it feels very important to not begin with that topic directly, but to rather begin by a better understanding of what our experience of self is, how the idea of self, the feeling of self manifests for us. I think it's fair to say that for many people, even if there is a self, which there's no denying that there's something like that going on, that whatever, many people overemphasize that self, are over preoccupied with it. We see it, and many of us can see it easily in other people; we see that someone is quite conceited. Or we see that people, it's an amazingly strong kind of a conceit, a negative conceit, of being very critical of themselves, very, have a very negative view of themselves. You know, there might be some appropriateness to see that we have foibles, we have things that are a little odd or maybe a little bit off.

But the way in which we have created a self around that and are preoccupied and consumed with that is overdone. Psychologists say that's one of the leading causes of depression, by no means the only way, but one of the leading causes for depression is rumination. I suspect most of that rumination is centered on me, myself, and mine. Somehow we're concerned with I'm not good enough, I'm not getting what I need, or I'm doing mistakes, or I'm inadequate, or I'm a bad person or something. So the strength of attention, the strength of getting glued to this whole idea of self, reinforcing it, having all this energy, all this tension flow around this idea, this sense of self, attention, a focus, a preoccupation, which is not so healthy and maybe not needed.

I think it's probably fair to say that there's something about... Maybe Western culture, maybe the culture here in the United States, maybe it's modern culture, where there's an increasing emphasis on self. Social media, some people get completely consumed and depressed and upset and anxious about having enough friends, enough hits, enough followers on their social media. Some people spend an ordinary amount of time with what they look like and

getting themselves thick photographs of themselves. There's a, I've seen over my lifetime with the coming of selfies and presenting oneself on social media, an amazing amount of focus on posing for pictures with clothes and looks and attitudes, just to present oneself in a particular way. If we go back and look at photographs from 100 years ago, especially from the old monks in Thailand, who'd never seen a camera before and were sitting and meditating or sitting quietly and cross-legged and they were going to be photographed, they had no reference point for what was going on. It never occurred to them to smile.

There was nothing happy. There was nothing good going on. There was no give and take of conversations that between the camera people and them. They were just being patient. They told to sit there for a picture. They didn't know what that was even. And so they look completely serious, some of them, and fierce and gloomy. Somehow they don't have the bright, happy face that some of us put on for cameras. They weren't concerned about how other people at other times would see them and think about them.

So this over-concern with ourselves, how people see us, how people will criticize us, over-concern with perfectionism, over-concern with, we have to do it just right, over-concern, some of that's been created by our society, some of it's created by our family experience, where maybe sometimes family members growing up will tell you who you are, that you're somehow bad. Somehow you're supposed to be the greatest, the next president or something. So the whole idea of self gets really strong. When my first son was young, my wife suggested to me that instead of saying good boy to my son, if he did something nice or, you know, wonderful, I would say, wow, that was fun. That looks like really a good thing, good time. Kind of be excited and approving, but without something that defined who he was, a good boy. Because then he has to continue being a good boy to get his father's love or care. Yeah.

So this over-emphasized on self, that's not the same as saying there's no self. That's a whole different orientation. It might be more useful because the whole teaching of not self can be a distraction from what's more important. What's more important is to be free of this tension, free of stress, free of clinging, free of this kind of over-preoccupation with a small part of who we are. You can feel, people who practice mindfulness and meditation can feel how a preoccupation with self narrows attention. Some people have reported that there's a darkening, like there's no more light anymore, because we're so caught up in these thoughts and ideas and concerns and desires related to this important thing, the self.

To let that fall away, or if that's not possible, fall away, to begin realizing that there's another place, another source within us, from where we can think. I call it contemplation. Very soft,

relaxed, profound feeling of thinking. There's other... We don't have to think with the control tower. There's other, there's places within where we can find some kind of generative feeling of intuition, of intelligence, of knowing. Mindfulness itself, awareness itself, doesn't have to come from the control tower where it's willed, a willed mindfulness. But rather, it's allowed mindfulness. It's allowed to flow and arise out of a deeper place of well-being inside. It doesn't mean that the preoccupation, remediation around self has stopped. It just means that this very precious mind resource that we have, attention, awareness, mindfulness, is no longer being used to feed that preoccupation, but rather it's used to nourish and feed a profound sense of inner presence, profound sense of peaceful, quiet, calm, relaxed, grounding here, to be really present here in the moment in a grounded, clear, settled way, where we're not rushing ahead, we're not rushing into preoccupations and thoughts, but rather what arises out of us if we're speaking, speaking almost as if it arises out from deep within, from the belly or deep in the torso, that where we're centered, is not in the mental tension.

We're not ahead of ourselves, not behind ourselves. We're not feeding rumination. We're not feeding conceit. We're not feeding this big preoccupation with self that, as I said, has grown in our society. What we're nourishing or cultivating is a profound sense of presence, attention, stability... coming from a deep place within. If we want to have a self, that is the self that is valuable to stay close to. That's a self that has no tension in it.

So when the Buddha said, excuse me, when the Buddha said, make yourself a refuge, your only refuge. You're not. Make the Dharma your refuge, your only refuge. He was pointing to the fact that there is a kind of place within, deep inside, that can be our refuge, our protection, our home, our sense of belonging that we carry with us. Like a turtle carries its shell, but in this case, something deep inside. So rather than arguing, is there an inner self, at this point in the process, we want to shift the locus where our life is based from the preoccupied self, the tense self, to a place that's much more calm and settled deep within.

When we start talking about not-self, we're not negating this deeper source within. We're beginning to see that deep source is not something to latch on to, not something to cling to, not something to become tense about. It's something actually to open to and be free or to. It turns out that this inner depth of who we are, the richest, most valuable parts of who we are, operates much better than if we don't clothe it in self, if we don't build or create or make a self with it. But just let it be, let it operate in a profound way. So those are the thoughts. I've said many times now this week, at this point, I'm not saying there's no self, but I'm not even teaching what not-self is about. I'm wanting you to become wiser and more clear about learning to see the complexity and the unnecessary tension that comes along

with our ordinary senses of self. To see that clearly sets the stage for you too, for you, all of us, to become interested in an alternative, part of what I point you to today. So that will be the topic next week. And that'll also go slow, but I'm looking forward to continuing on this very important topic. Thank you.