

Self and Not Self

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Good morning. So I have a couple of announcements. Is it a little bit loud for me? Is it loud for you? No? I have to put up with it. I have to put up with me. So... Also a couple of announcements.

One is that in about three weeks, we're going to have a community meeting here at IMC after the Sunday morning program. And it's a wonderful time usually to have these meetings. We usually take a big circle in the outer hall. And I'll talk a little bit about some of the things happening at IMC, the development, growth of IMC, and the changes and things like that. So, opportunities to volunteer and different things. So I hope some of you will come to that. That's on the 24th of August.

And then one of a wonderful nonprofit that was kind of a rose out of IMC called Insight World Aid has a number of initiatives that the people involved are doing. And one of them is a relatively simple, but I think very significant volunteer effort. And that is to, I think they do it once a month, to do, here in Redwood City, they gather at a, called a house, it is a house, but it's called... Catholic charities, no, Catholic Workers House. So Catholic Workers is a wonderful, kind of liberal Catholic church, a movement that got started in, maybe in New York or something many years ago. And so there's a kind of a wonderful representation of it.

And so we've been given use of kind of the main room at this unusual house to, on Thursday mornings, to make sandwiches and bag lunches than to deliver to homeless people around. I think the goal is to make a hundred of them. And if you'd like to volunteer with that, you can go on the Insight World Aid website called insightworldaid.org. And just not so far from here down in Redwood City. It's at the moment. Ram, what time is it on Thursdays? That's when you meet? Oh, so you meet at 12 noon. And so Ram, who's out there, he's one of the coordinators for it. And so you can talk to him if you're interested. But I think it should be a

wonderful time, both for the activity and also for the wonderful historical nature of this, of the house that's there tucked away in downtown Redwood City. So, and the next time they're doing it is this Thursday.

So I'm going to bravely broach a topic of self and not self, that it's fairly common for people who hear Dharma teachers talk the subject to just be confused and perplexed. And like, this is really strange. What are they talking about? I'm hoping to make it ordinary and simple and straightforward so that you can make it relevant for yourself. And I'll begin with an introduction that gets to it from the side or prepares the ground for it.

That once I've kind of sat down in meditation a little while and feel fairly settled and present, the... my meditation changes to some degree. That could be represented by the phrase, trust emergence, or represented by the phrase, allow things to emerge. Or I like yield to emergence. Yield to what's emerging. And maybe it helps to understand that we have a lot of experience, 10,000 experiences in any given day. If you can take into account every little sight and smell and taste and touch and thought and feeling and sensation in your body, there's such a wide kaleidoscope of things happening all the time.

But some of them clearly appear, emerge, and dissipate, disappear. They're there and then they're not there. Days come and go. They're not there. The morning appeared, there's the beginning of the day, it emerged into emerging. It's pretty much full light now, and at some point it's going to start dissipating and returning to darkness.

Meals come and go. Meals begin, and usually meals come to an end. Our experience of the meal comes to an end, and we go off and do something else. An inhale begins and it ends. It emerges, it does, it comes. You yield to the inhale, and it'll come to a time when it dissipates. Stops, dissipates, it's no longer there.

All of you shared an experience today that coming to IMC, many experiences, but that arose for you in your experience, in your direct perception, and then dissipated. And that was one of two doors. Yes. There was a door you had to walk through to come into the building. And that, you know, you probably weren't thinking about, oh, there's a door, and yielding to the experience of the door, having that experience. But in fact, that experience came to you, and then it, you know, it became irrelevant and no longer in your line of sight and no longer concerned. That IMC has doors. I mean, how many times do you think about that during the meditation? Yeah. And so things come and they go.

And so in meditation, when I'm settled, all kinds of things can emerge, start coming. And there can be emotions and there can be sensations and sounds and even thoughts. And

there's something about yielding to them that allows them to more generally, more easily just move right through. And part of the reason for that is yielding is an alternative to being involved with them, to pick them up, react to them, participate in them, be focused on them, make them into a big thing. And so then some experiences will stay for a long time because we're so preoccupied, so concerned about it.

So give an example. I'm just making this up. But I'm sitting here peacefully minding my own business. And my knee aches, starts hurting. I've had a lot of knee pain over these many decades, sitting, meditating. It wasn't hurting today, but it could easily have happened. And because of all these years, I thought I was over it, so I get annoyed. How could this be? This knee of mine is just a nuisance. This is annoying. And just that kind of like, now I'm really locked into it. So I'm concerned with it. So I'm not just letting that arise and just be there as a perception as it comes and goes. And then there's another sound or another thought, another sensation that just comes and fills the space. I'm now like locked into it. I'm annoyed with that knee that hurts.

And then I said, you know, and Gil, how could you be annoyed? Right? I mean, all these years of practice, I should be beyond being annoyed. This is an embarrassment to Buddhism and to myself. And I certainly important that these good people here don't learn that I'm annoyed because then they'll judge me and this annoyance is a real problem and I really need to get rid of this annoyance. I probably need to let go of something. I'm good at letting go. I'm going to try to let go of it here. You know, really it's a good thing to let go of and or resist or... That doesn't want to go so easily, so there must be some deep psychological issue that I have to really kind of get to the bottom of my annoyance. And I'm just making this annoyance. I'm kind of like building and feeding and solidifying the annoyance into this big monster.

If I just sat there, minding my own business, the knee hurt, annoyance arose. I yielded to the annoyance. Just allow it to come. Welcome. It probably would have just passed through. It wouldn't have been a big deal. Annoyance is not such a big deal in the scale of things. So this yielding something is an alternative to getting caught and making into something and making it solid. Does that make understandable well enough?

So... First, I want to...about this teaching on self and not-self. I'm using the word not-self very purposefully because I believe this is what the Buddha was saying. It popularly, in popular Buddhism, it's often idea that Buddha taught no-self, that there is no-self. In fact, he did not teach that. In fact, he taught that if you have the opinion, the view, that a self does not exist, that opinion is just suffering. And he goes on to say, that opinion is a quagmire, is a quicksand, is being lost in the wilderness. It's not a useful, valuable thing. But he also said

the same about the self-exists. To have the opinion the self-exists, that's suffering. That is just a cragmire, wilderness to be caught in philosophically as opinion, the world of opinions.

And it works a little bit like that knee pain and the annoyance. Once you start making an opinion about what is, that there is a self and there is no self, you're starting to participate to get contracted, to gel together, to make something out of the constantly emerging and disappearing world of experience. You're caught up in an opinion, which is a mental thought and idea. And if we're really, if that idea is really important... I've known people who were no-self fundamentalists, and they're going to tell you that Buddhism said there's no self. And it's just like a little bit, you know, that you can feel the intensity of this belief they have and how important it is. And so they've locked into an opinion. Right. The alternative to that is to stay in the world of emergence. Things emerge and things cease.

And in this one teaching the Buddha gave, that these two things, that the self exists, the self does not exist, is just an opinion. He does offer an alternative. And the alternative is, in fact, He says, both of those are a form of suffering, those opinions. Or maybe in a way that makes more sense to us in modern English. Both of those are stress. It's stressful to have that opinion. Maybe it's stressful because it goes against the direct experience of how things are constantly moving and shifting and changing. It's stressful to hold on to an opinion. Right?

And so the alternative the Buddha gave was not to get into this whole philosophy of, is there not a self, but rather to notice the stress. And notice the stress is emerging and disappearing. It arises and passes. So this ability to be settled and quiet enough so that we're not caught in the thinking mind. And to see that, and to allow stress to emerge. So an opinion appears, the opinion is, you know, I shouldn't be annoyed. I can really get onto that bandwagon. I can be, you know, the equivalent of a born-again annoyer. But instead, I just kind of yield to it, get out of the way of it. Okay, welcome, let it come and pass. And it passes through pretty easily because I'm not making anything of it.

And so, yes, we form these ideas. This is who I am. This is myself. Feel the stress of that. Feel the tension of that. And allow that to be there. Allow that to move through you. And you'll see that it passes. And when the stress of this opinion passes, the opinion has also passed. What's the reasonable thing to do then? To call on that opinion again. Just repeat it again and again and again. Why not? You know, it's good to suffer. Or, as the alternative Buddha gave, stay with the yielding, I'm paraphrasing him, stay to the yielding of things emerging and appearing so they can both appear and disappear. So we don't lock onto them. Don't make them into something more than the simplicity of what they are. So, so the... So I'll get back to this idea of not-self, what the Buddha did talk about.

He had teachings about not-self, and I'll get back to that. But what he taught much more than the teachings on not-self? He taught this teaching where he said, this, and the word is always this. This always refers to something particular. It's not a generalization. It's not a general idea about an abstract idea of life, abstract idea of who we are. He's always pointing you to a particular experience. The door that you went in today, you saw a door, somehow you felt the door handle maybe, there was a threshold you step over. You probably were hardly, you were certainly aware of it, but it wasn't something that you thought about too much and just did it. Now I forgot what I was going to say around that. I got caught in my words. So we're just going. So this idea of not-self always points to something in particular, not a generalization.

So this other teaching besides a not-self is related, it always begins with this. So it's like X, this. So you have to fill in the blank. It's always something particular. So this is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself. This is always particular. What's the problem with people saying there is no self or there is a self is Those are very general, broad philosophical categories, topics, concepts, that maybe has no basis in direct experience. It might be an intuitive sense. It might be a feeling we have, the feeling I am, but it's a broad, generalized feeling. But once we can get down and get settled enough in meditation and quiet enough, below the level of these generalizations or these general kind of broad, intuitive sense of things in the moment. But really here to be present for the particularity, the details of the present moment experience arising and passing, flowing through us, then we see this is not self. This is not mine. This I am not. This is not.

So, give you kind of maybe a simple example of how easy it is to create the idea of mind and then be caught in it and then suffer big time. It could be, and this has happened, most people in their meditation career will have this happen to them, where they have to leave the meditation hall, leave the Dharma talk for something, for a couple of minutes. Right? And they leave their cushion there. They were sitting in a chair. And they come back two minutes later, and someone is sitting in my seat. That's my seat. We didn't even know we created that, yeah, that's my seat. I was sitting there. I claimed it. I have a right to it. How could they take my seat? This is an act of violence, of radical disrespect, you know, and thoughtless, careless, probably conceded. They took my seat. Okay. If no one had taken the seat and you'd come back and sat there, that wouldn't have risen in the mind in such a strong way. This is my seat. And you wouldn't have carried that opinion of that person for the next 10 years. That person stole my seat, took my seat. And probably if you came back to IMC a week later, you wouldn't even remember which was your seat, which was your cushion, which was your spot on the

floor. Right? It's not that important, but we are so capable of glomming on to mine. But is it really yours?

One of my favorite stories of Suzuki Roshi, the Zen Master in Japan, in San Francisco, there's a photograph of him. So that's part of why it's so poignant for me. And so in the photograph, he's holding up his glasses like this, and he's leaning forward. I think he has a sparkle in his eyes. And he says, these are not my glasses, but you know about my tired old eyes, so you let me use them. Wow, my glasses. That's stressful. It's so easy to add stress on top of that simple word mine. It doesn't have to be. It's a, you know, it's a, you do people a favor sometimes by using the word mine. Like, you know, a neighbor needs to get to the doctor and their car is not working. And, um, and, uh, hey, you can use my car. That's, you know, as opposed to, oh, yeah. there's a car which the state of California has given me the sole rights to use, and I have the paperwork to show it. And it's up on the street. It's a gray Toyota. And it's 10 years old. And this here is a key that will work in it. And I think with rights I've been given by state of California, I can allow you to use it. I mean, by that time you finish that whole explanation, your neighbors died. It's easier to just say, you can use my car. And so you do them a favor. I mean, people have to sit there. And I've heard people, very idealistic Buddhists, who don't want to use the word I. And they go to great lengths to not say, I. You know, how are you today? Well, there's a feeling of energy in my chest that's kind of hot and moving around and there's some tension. It's like... Well, you know, okay. You know, but it doesn't really tell me much. I don't feel a connection to the person. I don't feel like interested in the person. And, you know, we do our friends a favor. It just says, you know, they ask, how are you? I'm fine. However, these words like mine and I and me... are powerful magnets for attachments. They're powerful magnets for other concepts and ideas that we put on top of them. They're powerful magnets for us to be, to internalize ideas that our society has about what me, myself, and mine is all about. And we suffer because of it.

And so, in one Buddhist teaching, is that the problems that can occur with mine is that there can be a lot of craving involved, a lot of clinging, wanting. And from that craving, then can come hatred, because I hate that person who sat in my meditation seat. I came to the meditation to overcome my hate. But look what the place did. It's their fault. Right? So this idea of craving can come along really quickly as soon as we say it's mine. And I love the idea, I've said this enough times, but that, I said, maybe I'll annoy you, is most of you came with shoes, many of you took them off and put them in a shoe rack, It happens occasionally that we go out to the shoe rack and our shoe is not there anymore. Someone has taken them because maybe they're left. It happened to me where usually it was Birkenstocks, it seems to happen.

You know, and so once there was clearly Birkenstocks that they got confused, but I got the older ones. But And another time there was a three-way Birkenstock switch, and I got the new ones. So these things can happen. And you might care. My shoes are gone. How could someone take in my shoes? Your shoes don't care. Your shoes don't care. The caring is the contraction, the caring. This is mine. It's reasonable to have some concern, but... It can be a magnet for intense clinging, craving, upset, and building greater and greater ideas of who I am, who other people are. Because this idea of me, myself, and mine, we also do that, it's they, it's them, it's theirs, which sometimes does a tremendous disservice for other people, the person who took my Birkenstocks. I know who that person is, that person is evil. Jesus. They just made a mistake. But we build this universe of strong opinions about people. And so they say, you know, them is a magnet for that. Is there an alternative to that? Do we have to always glom on craving and what follows with craving? That's what we're learning to do in this practice. Right? we're learning to relax the extra that we had on top of me and myself and mine.

So mine, the problems with that is craving. The problems with this I am in the teachings is the problem of conceit. And conceit in Buddhism is not just that I'm better than everyone else, it's also that I'm worse than everyone else. That's also a kind of way of holding on, locking on to this idea, this is, I am this way. I'm an adequate person. I'm a valuable person. I'm an important person. I'm this kind of person. I'm that kind of person. And some of that is okay to say, you know, it's innocent enough and helps people a little bit. You know, if someone says, you know, what do you do? And I say, well, I'm a Buddhist meditation teacher. It gives them some sense and some interest or lack of interest. When I went to Little League Games here in Redwood City with my son, and we were sitting in the bleachers, the parents, and usually you sat in the bleachers of your team. It was kind of a very interesting dynamic, but you'd sit there. But sometimes people would ask me, what do you do? And I say, I'm a Buddhist meditation teacher, or sometimes I say a Buddhist minister. And literally, happened twice, literally, that was all they had to hear to walk away without saying anything. I never found out why they walked away. I had some speculation, but I chose not to make a big story of it. I chose not to kind of make them a bad person or any kind of person. So, oh, well, but that's fascinating. And right here and... the Bay Area, in the shadow of San Francisco. That kind of response can happen to someone with simple religion like Buddhism. So, you know, so I was, but you know, sometimes you do a favor. I'm a Buddhist meditation teacher. Oh, great, that's interesting. Nice. I have a friend who wants to meditate. So we exchange interesting information, maybe helping someone. So it can be innocent. But so many times it's not so innocent the use of the word mine, or I am, I am this way, I am this way, I'm this way.

And then the third one is, and this is the one that's much more philosophical, existential, is this is my self. And when the Buddha used the word *atta*, this is the Pāli ancient language, it's the same as Sanskrit word *ātman*. It usually translates over and over again as self into English, but it's usually done also with a lowercase s, and it just seems like it's the self we were always talking about. You know, I'm here, myself. Okay. But in the ancient world, it's probably better translated with a capital S, because it has an existential reality. Or some people prefer to translate it as the word soul. The Western word soul is not a good match for what the ancient Indian word is, but it might be a little bit better than the English word self. And one of the great Burmese teachers, a very erudite learned, well-practiced monk in San Francisco, Yosel Ananda. He preferred to translate not self as not soul. And then you have a whole different feeling that Buddhists are saying that this is not a soul. So we're pointing to something in particular. What is this always? My thoughts, my consciousness... my intentions, my heart, my generalized sense of being alive. That's, you know, or that's my soul. That's my thing. That's my essence that will continue after I die. And what the Buddha is, he's not saying there's no soul. He's also not saying there is a soul. What he's always saying is that this is not the soul. This is not the self. Self. This is not who I am. This is not mine.

And that's why mindfulness is so useful, because it gets us to drop below the abstract concepts of things to be in the flow of direct experience. And the more quiet you become, and this insight, this understanding, this of what's being talked about as not self-teaching, is usually best understood when the mind is really quiet and peaceful and still. It's meant, not meant to be a belief, because then you're just back in the world of opinions. It's meant to be something that you experience and see directly for yourself when the mind is peaceful and quiet, calm, enough that you can be with the present moment details of experience. the arising of a sound, the arising of a thought, the driving feeling, a sensation. All the flow and movement of things happening in the present moment, things emerge and they disappear. They come and they go. And then, and at some point in deeper meditation, there is nothing in your direct experience that's not coming and going. That's not part of this flow of change, movement. And then it becomes obvious that anything that emerges and passes and is free of the overlay of concepts, ideas, abstractions, doesn't qualify as being the self. It doesn't qualify as being mine. It doesn't qualify as being who I am. Not because there isn't some innocent way of saying mine, I am and this is who I, this is me, the self. It's just that in that direct experience, that overlay, that gathering together and interpreting and experiencing that way is felt as extra. It's felt as stressful. And people will say, oh, everywhere I look in meditation, nothing qualifies as the self.

And so when the Buddha taught this teaching of not self, It was always particular. This is not self. He wasn't saying there's no self in some generalized, big philosophical way. He was really concerned with the... He was a phenomenologist, they say. He was really concerned about the phenomena of direct experience as it appears. And in that direct experience, you can't find anything that qualifies to be the self or even qualifies to be mine. when there's gentle wind brushes against your cheek, is that mine? That's mine. You know, you don't take a gentle coolness against your cheek as mine. It's just a coolness against your cheek. You let it be there. It's finally wonderful to have a thought arise, and don't take it as mine. Oh, a thought arises. It's so much simpler. Yeah. As soon as it's my thought, not only is it a little bit stressful to hold on to it that way, but it's a magnet, as I said, for a lot of ideas of me and mine that go along with it. I'm not supposed to have that thought. I hope no one knows that I have that thought. I hope they're not projecting my thoughts on the wall for everyone to see. This would be an embarrassment. You know, but just allow it to come and go, come and go. Okay.

Now, it's not that doing this, coming into that place is the purpose of meditation. The purpose of this is that in this state, we've let go of so much clinging to get to be that simple. So much of the way we hold on to ideas and concepts and ideas of self have softened and relaxed enough that we stand a very good chance... to be able to heal some of the deepest places of hurt that we might be carrying, because the body itself knows how to heal in a profound way. The heart can heal. But we have to get out of the way. This trusting emergence and allowing things to unfold is one of the great arts that we can learn over time to do it wisely in meditation. to get into this deeper place of just things arising and passing and not adding any concepts of me, myself and mine on top of it. And having let go of a lot of the clinging that craving and attachment that goes along with it gives us a better and better chance to let go, to release some of the deepest holdings that we have. It's hard to get down to the root of our attachments. Usually we're so distracted from it by all the other attachments that we're kind of swimming in and reacting to and building up. But to be able to be so, to quiet the thinking mind, quiet the interpreting mind, quiet the opinion mind from these opinions about me, myself and mine. Enough so we see it as an opinion, we see it as just a thought, an overlay on experience. So we can be at this more primary level, quiet level.

And life in some ways is much more fun that way. Some of you probably do things that are play, really fun. And it would be, maybe, I hope it's obvious, in some things you do that are really fun and engaging. If you suddenly thought, wait a minute, wait a minute. You know, am I the best basketball player on the court or is someone else the best basketball player

on the court? I am the best basketball. The reason I'm the best is that I've made the most baskets today. And how much should I make? I'd better let, I need to put that on a piece of paper and post it on the pole under the basket so everyone knows that I'm the best. As the mind spins out like this... probably you've stopped being a good basketball player. Someone throws you the ball, you don't even see it. Because you're busy kind of fantasizing about how you're going to tell everyone how great you are. There's games, playing, music played, art that's done. All kinds of things that we do, wonderful conversations with friends, wonderful ways of being with people, that it goes so much nicer. Right? if we don't get caught in this idea of me, myself, and mine, and how all the things that come along with it, those drop away for a while. And some of the best conversations I've had with people in my life was the kind of the sense of self dropped away. One of the earliest ones I had in college that was really memorable for me was my friend and I were, somehow I ended up by accident, I don't know, in a living room. Um, not writing, but talking up a play out of blues. But we were acting it out as we invented it. And both of us were uninhibited. And I had never had that kind of uninhibited feeling and had this freedom of creativity that came out as we made up this play. It was so much fun. And to be inhibited is to be caught a little bit in this me and myself in my world. So it's not just in deep meditation where this is relevant, but in deep meditation, it's a wonderful place to learn about this, to get a sense of and feel for what it's like, so that maybe it also transfers a little bit more often into our regular life, where we're more likely to trust emergence. We're more likely not to glom on to these ideas and get stuck in these concepts of me, myself, and mine.

So in summary... The Buddha did not teach there is no self. He did not teach there is a self. Both of those, he sees just an opinion. And in ancient India, they were philosophical, doctrinal, existential.