

Dharmete: Insight (33) This is not Self

Gil Fronsdal

August 06, 2025

Keywords: anattā, atta, ātman, not-self, self, pāramī, suffering, attachment, opinion, refuge

So hello and welcome to this continuity of a series on insight of the Insight Meditation and the particular form of insight in the last two days and then today is a common Buddhist teaching of the Buddha for us to use our awareness to realize, to see clearly in a way that's represented by these sentences. This is not mine. This I am not. This is not self. And each of these are innocent enough to say, to see there's mine and I am and this is who I, this is myself. It can be done lightly and appropriately as a kind of general category.

And we're getting a big example of this self thing. It is in modern West and modern psychotherapy, it's a relatively well-designed, relatively common for therapists to discern, to assess that someone needs to become, to develop a stronger sense of self. And I don't feel any need to argue against that. But Buddhism, if that's just kind of a general kind of category for certain tasks, certain things that need to be developed and cultivated, so, for example, but in Buddhism we would say that certain strengths, inner strengths need to be developed. We might say the ten perfections, that some of the *pāramī* need to be developed. Generosity, ethical integrity, ability to let go, wisdom, ability to have initiative, patience, the ability to be honest and monitor oneself and know, the ability to be determined, have a resolve, to follow through on what we say we're going to do, the ability to have kindness and love, the ability to have equanimity and resilience.

And there's a lot of other inner states that can be developed. So Buddhists, it's possible to say this, that these things need to be developed without necessarily saying, we need to have a stronger self. But, you know, if that stronger self is just a shorthand for saying all these other things, then it's fine. But if stronger self is making a stronger, tight identity, like this is who I am, this is, I'm supposed to be the strong self looks like this, I have to be like this, I have to be seen this way. And there's a lot of conceit, a lot of attachment that can go into that. So this idea that we add extra, right?

And so this idea that in our third one, which is today, this is not self. This is not myself. This is not the self within me. That itself can have all these extra layers we had on that form suffering. One of the ways that there's stress and suffering is people hear this idea that they assume, it's said this way, it's not what the Buddha said, but plenty of Buddhists will say there is no self. And people are ready to protest and say that's ridiculous.

And they've gotten all tight and worked up because they don't like, they don't believe, they don't feel it's wrong, that view. So there's stress. That's added layer. And then, you know, I'm saying that the Buddha teaches something different, which I'll talk about more later. But he has teaching of not-self. And that also might be triggering, wait a minute, this is too much, this doesn't make any sense, this is different than how I grew up.

And of course there's a self. And so the reaction to it is extra. But even having the idea, this is self. I've seen, and it's not uncommon for some people to assume the true self, the essential self, is some kind of pristine, pure consciousness. And I've seen people who hold on to that or believe in that or orient themselves around that. And they limit themselves.

They feel there's certain freedom to be found in open, radiant consciousness. But to hold on to it and to have that as a philosophy and try to get other people to believe in this too. And this is the real truth. This is the real self. There's layers and layers of attachment on top of that that go on. And also to take anything as the self that prioritizes that over all things that are happening, the arising and passing of phenomena, narrows the scope of attention.

It's kind of a holding on. It's kind of a selectivity. It's kind of a pushing other things away. So the Buddha said that, so what we're talking about here, this third, this is not self, is closer to the Western idea of a soul. It's a little bit complicated both because both in ancient India and in modern English, we can use the self in different ways, the word self. Self.

It can be very innocent. You say, tell someone, you know, you can serve yourself food if you're hungry. And you don't telling them, saying your soul can serve food if the soul wants to. It's not an S with a capital S. It's just a simple, ordinary pronoun for, you know, that person over there. Please help yourself with some food.

And you say, I'm going to do it myself. Someone says, you know, that, you know, can I help you with tying your shoelaces? And then I can do it myself, no problem. And that's innocent enough. But S with a capital S, the true self, the essential self, in ancient India, the word for self, *atta* or *ātman*, had both a simple ordinary pronoun meaning and had a meaning of something that's much more like a soul. Like this is the true essence of who I am.

This is what persists between lives. When I die, the soul continues or the consciousness con-

tinues. That's really who I am. And, you know, it's fine to speculate about that and have an idea of that, but to hold that as an opinion, to grasp onto it, to insist, to only feel like you're right if you're close to that, is, so to that idea, that opinion, even if there is a true essential soul, the opinion that there is, the philosophy that there is, that is suffering, that's stressful. So there's layers and layer of stress that put on top of it. And the fascinating thing about Buddhism, Buddhist practice, is that it's a practice that reveals more and more where the stress is in ourselves, where the stress is in the mind.

And one of the stresses is around this idea, this holding on, this interpretation, this recognition, or this opinion, that there is this true essential self that we have. Some people, the need for that is quite strong, and they need to, because it's an alternative to chaos, it's an alternative to a life that has no meaning or purpose, it's a sense that there is a refuge that's inside, deep inside, that will continue after I die. It gives some stability, which is needed for people. But Buddhist practice provides all stability, provides the safety, the refuge, without recourse to holding on to a sense of the self. Is there a self? Yes. Is there not a self?

What the Buddha said about both those, if it's an opinion, if it's an orientation, and maybe even a deep, deep mind, deep, peaceful, quiet, still mind, it's phenomenal how subtle the little opinions come in, the views, the recognition, that interprets our experience. And the interpretation of this subjective sense of self and something is, it can be seen as just another movement of the mind. So the Buddha said, any opinion, any view, any doctrine, that there is a self or there is no self, is stressful, is suffering. And that it's a quagmire to go into. It's a wilderness of philosophy and ideas that just causes more suffering. The alternative the Buddha gave is to see things arise and pass, to see the changing nature of things without overlaying on top of it, interfering in it, blocking with it, pushing at it.

The notion that the ideas, the orientation, the coalescing around this is the self. But... And rather than believing that there is a self or is not a self, the orientation here is this word this. This is not self. And that's what we'll talk about more as we go along this week. The this. This is not self.

The particulars of life is not self. Maybe there's a generalized way of understanding that more of a conceptual overlay that can kind of see a self, but that's a conceptual overlay. In the immediacy of our life, where that's where freedom is found. We can't put our finger on anything that say, "oh, this is the self". So what is your notion of who you essentially are? Do you have some reference point?

That you have a soul, that consciousness is the true essence, that there is some kind of feeling of "I AM-ness" deep inside. You don't say "I am X", but there's an "AM-ness". And maybe you

don't even have to say "I-AM". There's just an M. I-AM. There's an "am-ness". That M-ness is... It is an assertion of self, it is an assertion of no self, but it's the closest thing I have to a self. That's self. But even maybe that's extra, to see that that assumption, that overlay is extra. Nothing extra.

So see what you say, how you operate. What's your sense and opinion and view you have of the self, yourself as a self? What does that mean? What is the subject? What is the subject that goes through your life. And is it really the self? What does that mean?

So maybe it's a little bit philosophical, a little bit abstract, so don't get too preoccupied by this. And we'll continue this topic again tomorrow. Thank you.