

Insight (40) Freedom in the Emptiness of Self

August 15, 2025

SUMMARY KEYWORDS Buddha, insight, not-self, observing impermanence, river, flow, wave, attachment, stress, tension, self-concern, self-criticism, self-harm, roles, soul, emptiness, circle, veto, heart, let go, Mountain Stream Meditation Center, John Travis

Gil Fronsdal

Welcome to this continuing series on Insight, the center of insight meditation. This will be the last talk that is specifically about not-self. For those of you who were here yesterday, you might recall that as we sat in the middle of impermanence – the changing nature of phenomena – we turned our attention around 180 degrees to the one who is observing change. We considered the experience of knowing or being aware.

We saw that knowing and being aware also disappear. That experience also comes and goes. It is part of the river – part of the constant flow that has value. Each current in the river is valuable for carrying the river along. Each little wave of the river is part of the river for sure. This sense of self that we have is just another wave, another current that shifts, changes, and comes and goes. And in that process, something deep can be let go.

Any attachment we have to self, any clinging to self, and whether there is or is not a self ... that is not a question that the Buddha was interested in. In fact, he was less than interested in it. He felt that this whole question, “Is there or not a self?” was a detour, was a dead end, was not useful. But there is freedom from preoccupation with self, freedom from attachment, freedom from the stress of self. And if you're paying really careful attention – and mindfulness helps a lot – we can start seeing that a fair amount of our self-concern carries with it stress and tension.

Sometimes the stress is quite extreme. So extreme that for some people, it makes their life so difficult –self-concern, self-criticism, feelings of not belonging and not being important, or being somehow wrong or guilty – that they cause self-harm. It can be quite depressing for people.

But what we're doing here is not necessarily working through depression or these feelings, but questioning the very basis upon which that stress and tension arises – the clinging, the orientation around self, the making of a self, and building a self.

It is possible to let go very deeply. And the deeper our letting go, the more freedom we can experience. And the more freedom we have, the issue of “Is there or isn't there a self?” is not particularly important. It is more of an intellectual interest.

But how we get attached to self is interesting if we want freedom. When we're free, then things are as they are. And one of the things that happens with deep freedom is that we're much more aware of the contingent and impermanent nature of the ways in which we construct self – the roles of self we have, the assumptions of self, the self-becoming that we're involved in – the different parts of life and different situations.

We call on different ways of being organized as a human being in order to engage in the world. A fascinating teaching that Buddha gave is that rather than being concerned about “Is there or is there not a separate self?”, he taught that if the way that you've constructed a self or you hold a self in a particular situation is harmful for you, or if it is unhealthy or unwholesome for you, then you can let go of it. And if the way you constructed a situation is wholesome and beneficial, then continue with it. Don't make it a problem, but do know that it's temporary. It's constructed. It's bringing together different aspects of who we are. Don't make that into the Self that we are. Don't hang on to it. Be ready for it to shift and change. So you're ready to construct another healthy way of being and organizing and being with yourself. And one way to understand this that I value is this idea that whatever the self is, whatever the self-construct is, it is constructed and it's empty of any inherent self and permanent existence.

In Buddhism there's not a soul that continues over lifetimes or continues after death. And there is not not a soul. That whole question of what it is, "Is there a soul or not a soul?" is the same as the question, "Is there a self or not a self?". It's all empty and contingent. Whether there is or is not a soul is not relevant for Buddhism. What's relevant is what we can actually experience. Always go back to how we're experiencing here and now, because it is in the experience here and now that we build our stress, our tension, and where we find our freedom.

In that freedom, we discover that at the center of all things – the center of our life, the center of this world – there is a vast emptiness, a vast freedom, a vast spaciousness. I love the analogy that it's like the great, beautiful, empty space around a circle of people sitting in council. People have sat in council for millennia, in wise ways sitting by a fire or sitting in a circle in the woods, or sitting in a circle in a temple or different places, in order to have conversations where everyone is an equal. Everyone has a voice. But no one person can make a decision that has veto power. You can speak, but we aren't necessarily going to do what you're saying. We're going to listen deeply, find out what's going on here, and go to the depth of this experience. And maybe after a while, we'll all know together what is the wisest way forward here. But everyone is welcome to speak from the heart.

What that means for me is that all the different parts of yourself ... all the different parts of how you want to ... no matter if it's a wise or foolish part of yourself ... there's an art in mindfulness to stop and listen and to hear deeply. Where is it coming from? From the heart? What's underneath it? What's the deeper call of, what's the deeper expression that's there?

This idea of the emptiness of self actually creates space to listen, feel, and know more and more deeply. And to do that with other people as well. Make space for them, hear them, and get to know what their heart is about. Some people don't even know their own heart, but maybe you can feel underneath, see through their words, or help them to discover what their beautiful heart is like.

This whole teaching of not-self is a profound teaching possibility. You do not need to believe any teaching having to do with self, not-self, or no-self. If you assume a particular belief – like you're supposed to understand and believe a certain teaching and now act accordingly – does a huge disservice to you. In insight meditation, the idea is to have insight, to see for yourself, to have it revealed how all this inner life works. So we get to see the operation, construction, and dynamics of being attached to self, or building a self, assuming a self, and feeling the tension and stress of it. Especially if we see tension, let it go. There's no need for that tension around self. In fact, it gets in the way.

There is something much more profound here in you and in this world. That is an empty friendly space, this empty compassionate place where emptiness is not... where the phenomenal absence is not ... a diminishing matter of who we are. It is the very space that allows for love, freedom, creativity, intelligence, and respect for all things to come forth. Let your circle be as wide, full, and complete as you can ... all parts of yourself and all parts of the world. Let them all sit in your circle. You don't have to deny yourself just because you're not at the center.

But you don't have to be asserting yourself by being at the center of all things. Let freedom be the center. Let rest be at the center. Let peace be at the center. Let this empty, spacious, porous, transparent love be at the center. But you have an important place in this circle and a share in it. Keep the circle going. Keep the love, connection, and generosity to care for your circles.

I hope that this week's focus on the topic of not-self has given you new perspectives and new understandings to look at in your own life.

There are a couple of things I'd like to announce before we end.

Next week I will not be on You Tube. We are very fortunate to have Matthew Brensilver back. I'm delighted that he'll share his wisdom with you.

I'd like to ask for your support for this phenomenal activity we are doing on You Tube. It's been more than five years now that we've been broadcasting on You Tube. Someone who is familiar with Zoom might want to volunteer to help us when we have guest teachers. We also could use help with someone who can do editing after the production. The way to volunteer is on the IMC website.

Next week I will be up in the Sierras in a place called Nevada City, a small town that has a meditation center started by my good friend John Travis. Thirty-five years ago, we both started teacher training together and we both developed meditation centers. John's center in Nevada City is a beautiful property with wonderful trees. It is very peaceful.

I'm going to be in Nevada City tomorrow doing a half-day retreat together with John Travis. This is my wonderful opportunity to do this retreat as a fundraiser to support John's Mountain Stream Meditation Center. All the meditation centers do wonderful work. They succeed through the wonderful generosity of volunteers and of people who support the center and the teachers monetarily.

Tomorrow's fundraiser is called "a happy fundraiser." Maybe just the fact that John and I will be doing it together makes it happy. We're delighted with each other and being together. In the retreat, there will be meditation, teachings, maybe some guided meditation. John and I will be having conversations about our experience as teachers. Mountain Stream will have it on Zoom. Some of you might like to come and be part of the Circle of Support for Mountain Stream. That would be great. When I return a week from Monday, I'll be back at IMC.

Thank you all.