

# Insight (37) Benefiting from What Is Not Self

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Welcome to this continuing series on Insight, a central part of Insight Meditation. In the last twelve or so days, the focus has been on insight into not-self. And I underscore the word not. Because sometimes what's taught is that the Buddha said, "There is no-self." He never said that. The only time he referred to the idea of "there is no-self," he did it to denounce it – to say that it just brings suffering to hold on to the idea, "There is no self."

I haven't really completely addressed this topic of how the Buddha presents self or not self. What I have been doing all this time is trying to point out how much selfing activity our minds are involved in. How much we impute, or we build, make up, assert, overlay, and create ideas about self.

Conceit is one of the big selfing activities. There's nothing inherent in life that requires a human being who walks the planet to have conceit. But it can be quite strong and intense. It is possible not to have that conceit. Conceit is an extra addition.

A lot of selfing is an activity of the mind around the notion of self, including self-criticism, shame, or embarrassment around "me, myself, and mine." It is important to look at all these different activities of selfing that we do. And to understand when we're doing it unnecessarily – when we're doing it in ways that cause us suffering or pain, or when we do it and cause other people suffering and pain. This is part of the function of insight meditation. It includes seeing all the creativity in creating a self, building a self, making a self, defending a self – and how much of that is extra.

We begin to find an alternative to that. We find that we can be more peaceful. We can avoid being so actively involved in creating something – creating a self, asserting a self, proving a self. All kinds of things we do. We can take a vacation from it. We can take a pause. To make it a little bit sacred, we can call it a sacred Sabbath from the activity of selfing, the doing of self. As we do that, then we don't recognize there is no self, but we can recognize that in certain experiences – in ways of being, in forms of awareness, certain things we're aware of – there is no self.

For example, regarding this wonderful bell we have here at IMC. You know, as the main teacher at IMC, I can almost feel like this is mine, and it's important that I have it. And probably when I retire – if I ever retire – the person who gave it to IMC kind of gave it to me – so it's mine, and I will take it. It's really an important part of my identity, and of course I have to have it.

There's so much "I and me and mine" in that example. As an alternative, we can be really mindful, quiet, and attentive. You can feel how tiring "me, mine, myself" is. Maybe even some of you get a sense of that because it is tiring that I am being so silly and saying this kind thing over and over around the bell. Just hearing it can be jarring. To put that down and just have the bell be "bell" ... there's no Gil in the bell. There's no self in the bell. It's just bell.

It is possible to take a vacation from being preoccupied by this bell. I find if I do that, rather than thinking about it all day and planning and wanting and fantasizing about what the bell will do for me ... Wow, it's so nice not to have that preoccupation. It's peaceful. And that peace is wonderful.

Now I can start thinking, I want that peace. That peace is me. That peace is mine. That peace proves that I'm a wonderful person. I've got to tell people about my peace. I have the peace of not selfing. And I want to show you how great I am because of that.

Immediately we can try to recruit the self, or the peace into the selfing project. It's also possible to gaze upon the peace and see, there's no self in that peace. There's no self to apply or impute. There's no need to invent a self or decide whether there is or is not a self in that. We can gaze upon the peace with no self needed.

Then a person might say, there's peace, but that's not myself. It's just peace. As we settle deeper and deeper into meditation – and this is one of the advantages of becoming really calm and settled – we take more and more vacation from selfing. We start seeing the subtle ways in which we are involved in "this is myself," "this is mine," and "I am this." Then we realize we don't need to do that. At some point, it can become really clear -- maybe in deep meditation, or in daily life if we go to the beach, or we have a wonderful nap, or maybe sometimes in lovemaking, it can happen that it becomes really clear. There's a feeling that self just disappears. Self-activity disappears.

What some people will do is decide philosophically, "Wow, this is the true way of being. Really, truly, there is no self in this lack of activity." The Buddha doesn't want to go that far to make that philosophical conclusion. He always takes the simple route that there's peace, and there there's the absence of selfing. There is no self in the peace. There is no self in the spaciousness. We don't see a self in awareness.

But then if we impute, "That's the true self," then we've added something not needed. If we say, "It's mine," we've added something not needed. But to gaze upon different things and see no self in them – to not recruit it into the self project – gives us a vacation. It gives us a pause, an alternative. Some people find it very disconcerting and disorienting, because the way they make themselves safe in the world, know who they are, and bless other people, is completely connected to their self-concept and the self-identity that they're constantly creating, reinforcing, and using as a medium through which to make themselves safe and known in the world. To know that they're loved in the world, or something. To have that fall away and not be seeing the world through the lens of "me, myself and mine" can be quite frightening for some people.

But the opportunity and possibility of meditation is hopefully where we meditate is safe, and kind of nice and comfortable. Slowly over time we start feeling more and more safe, comfortable, and at ease without imputing self, without playing the self game and without being involved in self. Something deep begins to settle and relax. And that deeper settling is partly a freeing from selfing, self-preoccupation, and self-creation. We might have experiences more and more, there in that experience, in this experience, there is no self. Wow, what a vacation. How nice it is. Some people get attached to it. Some people want to make a great philosophical conclusion. This is the true way of being. We're supposed to be this way. And we're not supposed to create any self or have any self-operating. We're supposed to just dwell in this space where this particular activity of selfing doesn't occur.

I don't think that's the teaching of the Buddha. I don't think that that's wise. That's just getting attached. It is to select something out of the whole. We are full, complex human beings. And of course we do some selfing. Of course we have self-understanding. Of course we understand who we are in relationship to other people, to our culture, to other cultures, to roles we have, to situations we have. Of course we need to be concerned about all kinds of things about how we are, what things we do, what we say, the impact they have, the impact it has on ourselves.

And so some of the roles of self, some of the activity of self, can occur quite innocently without a lot of suffering. We don't have to stop selfing. But the deep vacation from selfing, the deep seeing and resting in an experience that feels like there's no self there, gives us a much clear window, a view of how we pick up self, how we are involved in this whole self thing that's kind of needed to get around in our social life, and to do it lightly. To do it clearly aware that we're putting on a role, we're interpreting something ourselves in a particular way, given a certain context.

Who we are as a self and how we understand ourselves might be very different if we go into a preschool class to play with the kids, than if we go to... I don't know what... to the mechanic to get our car fixed. And so the shifting, changing landscape of self ... We're more fluid, more at ease, more willing to shift and change and not hold on to things, appreciating how so much of it is just created. And we can be part of that creation. We can be creative and even fun and playful in this notion of self and how we hold it, while being sincere and authentic enough, and free.

So to give yourself a vacation from selfing, not as an abandoning of anything, not as a betrayal of anything, but as a way to come and live in the world more fully refreshed, clear, with better understanding, in a better capacity to support and care for others.

So maybe if some of what I said today is relevant for you, some of what I said today is understandable by you, you have a reference for this ... through the day today, for the next 24 hours, when you're awake, see if you can find opportunities to have a vacation from your self-concern, knowing that you can pick it up when it's really necessary. See how deeply the mind, the heart, can rest, can be refreshed, can be freed when it's not always in the shadow or in the grip of selfing.

So I hope you can enjoy that which has no self in it for these next twenty-four hours.

Thank you.