

Insight (38) This is Not Self

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Welcome to this amazing topic of Insight and the capacity we have to see clearly. The word *vipassana*, translated as “insight,” has the word “see” in it – *passana* – and “*vi*” is the emphatic, to “really see.” That becomes “clear seeing” or “insight.”

I think to appreciate the wonder and potential of it, is to begin understanding the possibility of seeing without a filter of all kinds of preconceived ideas, biases, preferences, and abstract ideas that we have, and just “see” simply. It was a big lesson for me when I was 18 and traveling with friends to Morocco. I felt a very strange thing in Morocco. I felt there was a kind of ease and simplicity in my mind that I had never felt before. It wasn't dramatic, but it was something different. After a while, I decided the reason was that people back then in Morocco wore clothes that were very different from what I was used to growing up in Europe or in the United States. Looking at the clothes they were wearing, I had no context in which to judge them, peg them, or see where they were. “They're conservative,” “They're hippie,” they're “this” or “that.” I didn't have that overlay. My mind wasn't creating this interpretation. I was just seeing people with these different clothes. It was very simple. It was remarkable that such a simple, innocent thing as recognizing someone because of what clothes they're wearing is an activity of the mind that keeps the mind activated. And not doing that was actually pleasant and nice.

To begin to see clearly without the overlay of concepts or ideas is to see things as they are. One of the first insights we talked about some weeks ago is the insight into change or inconstancy. To settle down quiet enough and still enough, without abstractions, is to see that under all the sensations and ways in which things appear and disappear in our senses and perceptions, there is an experience of a deep quiet mind. The mind is relaxed and still, but everything else, including awareness itself, is fluid and flowing. It feels more like we're in a river of change all the time. And when we're feeling everything changing, we can see if we do something – a particular thing that's extra – that is an addition to the change. That is, we see our experience and ourselves through the lens of self, through the lens of “This is who I am, this is myself, this is mine.”

It can be innocent enough and appropriate to have that overlay. But it is important to realize that you don't have to do it all the time. It is even more powerful not to do it, and to have relief and peace in the mind, that is perhaps comparable to what I experienced when I was 18 in Morocco. It is a lot easier to go through the world without constantly attributing something to the self, or having the self as part of the picture, or even having that be the filter through which we experience things.

Some people see the world through the lens of “What's in it for me?” Or “What's the danger for me now?” And they are constantly on the lookout because there's danger and they are protecting themselves. Of course we have to do that at times. But it's really good to have a situation create the possibility of putting all that to rest. We can put it to rest and just be in meditation. We can learn to develop strong *samadhi* and settledness where we are not just in a state of bliss or the happiness of *samadhi*, but we have a state of mind that is able to come into the changing, shifting river of experience every moment. We are able to see that a thought arises, and we can leave it alone and see it go. We can appreciate the coming and going of a thought.

To see the details of an emotion from a distance is like seeing a concept. We relate to some emotions as if we're the weather forecaster on the news who says a rainstorm is coming. And a storm might be coming, but it's just an abstraction. We see that: “Oh, that's the weather report.”

A thought can arise, "I'm a mediocre person." Or "I'm a good person." Or "I'm a bad person." It's just a thought that arose. It's just an announcement, maybe like a public service announcement. "Let's take a deeper look. Let's not live with that abstraction. Let's drop down, closer and closer." So as we meditate and the mind becomes clear and more settled, we see that things are constantly shifting, and that shifting is happening in a place of stability. The paradox is that when we are thinking all the time and agitated, we create solid concepts of "me, myself, and I" as well as solid concepts of others and of the situation we're in.

But when the mind is not agitated, not busy and spinning around, not making a lot of thoughts and ideas, but the mind is very quiet, then the mind becomes still. Then we see that the experience around us, the sensations, the comings and goings of thoughts and feelings and how they're directly experienced, those are all moving.

We can shift from making solidity with our agitated and spinning thoughts to quieting our thoughts and the inner life. We can be kind of floating or swimming or massaged by what is constantly changing and shifting.

Often coming into that state through *samadhi* is very pleasant. It's really a delight. We feel the relief of being in this simple place. When we start seeing how sensations, thoughts, ideas, stories, interpretations, and even emotions have this constantly shifting and changing nature, it's hard to take any individual simple moment's experience that comes and goes as "That's who I am."

If the wind blows gently against your cheek and you feel the nice, smooth, maybe cool sensation, you don't interpret that as "This is who I really am," or "This is my breeze. I'm going to define myself by that little cool sensation." There's no "self" added to it.

We start doing that with everything, leaving it alone. We see that it doesn't make sense that if a sensation arises, we take it as "me." There's a kind of a clear seeing. "Wow, that's not self. What a relief."

As we go deeper and deeper in insight practice, there comes a time where everything that we experience directly is seen as "That's not self." When everything you look at – everything that comes into the realm of awareness – is not self, it is very easy to come to an abstraction and generalize, and say, "There is no self." That's extra. We don't need to do that. It's adding suffering or complications or stress on top of things. Don't interpret, just allow it to be.

"This is not self." I see nothing, that self, and enjoy it. Feel the freedom in that. Feel the lack of interpretation, lack of this self-clinging that might ordinarily be involved. The deepest experience of "not self" comes from a deep experience of inconstancy, change, and impermanence.

It is in the deep experience of change that we appreciate that anything that changes – in and of itself – is not the self. I don't have to define myself by it. I should be aware of it and conscious of it, but I don't have to add this extra layer on top of it.

In ordinary life, there might be times we shouldn't need to add the extra layer, but instead have vacation from the extra layer. We can have experiences of knowing ourselves in a certain kind of way, knowing ourselves without making a self, without attributing a self, without positing a self

Without in any particular detail, the present moment experience can be a phenomenal relief and a way to begin loosening up some of the deepest places of clinging we have inside us. A lot of the clinging we have is one way or the other related to "me, myself and mine."

So the core insight of insight meditation is not an insight into "There is no self," but rather it's an insight that "this", whatever "this" is, whatever the particularity of the moment, this is not self. So as I've mentioned earlier in the meditation, you might have an abstract idea of a rainstorm coming, but once you're in the rain and you see an individual drop, it doesn't occur to you that drop is the storm. It's just a drop. It may be part of the storm, but then you hold a drop in your hand and you don't say, "This is the storm," it's just the drop in your hand. And the idea of storm disappears.

I've been in a storm where I saw it coming, and I was worried and concerned and caught up in my thoughts. Then when I was in it, it turned out to be safe and nice and kind of fun. So be careful with your abstractions.

Maybe you can find times in meditation, or having a cup of tea, or going for a little walk by yourself, where you can experiment with being as simple as you can. You can understand and appreciate seeing whatever occurs has "not self." No self needed. Nothing needs to be measured against me, myself, and mine. It's just the bird singing. It's just the feet touching the ground. It's just a thought arising. And it goes. The insight into not self is always specific. It's never a generalization.

May it be that you appreciate how nice it is to not be adding "self" into the mix as you go through this day.

Thank you.