

Insight (34) Self as the Activity of the Moment

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Welcome to this talk that continues a series of talks on Insight. For those of you who have been involved since the beginning of the year, these talks on insight hopefully stand well on their own, but part of what they're meant to be is a continuation of the practices of *samādhi* that we did the first half of the year. *samādhi* provides a very different context for insight than the ordinary every-day, distracted, caught-up mind where there's a lot of thinking. The thinking can be around self-preoccupation, which is so integral and part of the whole way that we're living. It is unimaginable to have this wonderful non-preoccupation with self. For some people, it can feel like a kind of a death because that's the only thing they know. How we can stay safe is by constructing, keeping, maintaining, defending, and asserting a certain kind of self that may have kept them safe. It really worked well growing up with the difficulties of life.

Some people grow up with tremendous challenges of violence, neglect, and fear. Building up a sense of self is really the only thing that gives them stability and a strong sense of safety so that they find their way in the world and stay protected. So there's a good reason why the teachings of not-self are challenging. There may even be people who protest.

But to experience *samādhi* – a subtle and quiet well-being that settles in some deep way the tense, contracted, and preoccupied mind – then we know there is an alternative to the self that gets constructed, held, and protected and is really needed in life sometimes. But it is not needed all the time. To know there is an alternative, a vacation that gives safety and benefit – allows us more leeway and flexibility. Then maybe when we go back into a world of self-preoccupation, we don't have to take it so solidly and be so tight in holding on to it.

One of the things I tried to convey these last few days is how much extra unnecessary focus there can be on “me, myself, and mine.” When there's any sense of “mine,” of ownership and possession – even of ourselves, our body and our emotions – and if it comes along with craving and attachment, then the craving and the attachment is the extra layer. And it's not necessary.

If there is a strong sense of valuing or devaluing oneself – that I am a certain status, a certain worthiness or unworthiness, or that I am a certain profession or a role – if there is a lot of conceit, which is attachment around an idea of self, then there are layers and layers of extra effort, work, and preoccupation. which in a deep state of *samādhi* and well-being is not needed to operate.

There can be a strong attachment to a certain opinion, view, philosophy, or doctrine about what the true self is – the true soul – “This is who I am.” There is this “thing” – the self, the soul – that I have to hold on to in belief, because then I know that I'm safe over many lifetimes, or then I know what is going to take me to heaven or take me to hell, or something. There's a whole constellation around a sense of soul, true self, or essence that people can get quite caught in. This is called the attachment to opinions, to views, to doctrines. There can be layers and layers of what is extra that keeps the mind busy. And when the mind is in *samādhi* – in deep states of peace – a lot of that falls away.

We begin learning that there is an alternative to self-preoccupation and self-rumination. There's an alternative to self-assertion, self-evaluation, and this whole vortex, a whirlpool of self-concern. An alternative to a concern that is so easy to get caught up in – with a lot of support from our society – that this is what we have to focus on.

And to know there is an alternative – the noble silence – allows us to begin shifting the center and the locus of how we enter into our life, how we live our life.

I'm going to tell a story – maybe I'll partly read it. It's from my book, *The Monastery Within*. The title of the story is "The True Self." So now you're going to find out what the true self is. So you probably want to listen closely!

A woman came to the monastery determined to ask the abbess how she could discover her true self. She'd assumed many identities over her lifetime, most of them identities other people had expected of her. When she presented her concern, the abbess replied, "Since knowing the true self is so important for you, you should ask this question of someone who has fully penetrated the issue of self. We have a very learned monk here who has read every Buddhist scripture and the many commentaries. He studied with some of the greatest Buddhist teachers of this age. He has spent years meditating and has deep realization. Come, I will introduce you to him."

The abbess led the woman into the courtyard, where a solitary monk was absorbed in sweeping the courtyard. "That is him," said the abbess. "When you're interested in the true self, it's important not to be abstract. Don't ask what the true self is. Ask him, what is his true self?" Shyly, but with great hope, the woman walked up to the monk and asked, "What is your true self?" The monk smiled and continued to sweep.

Going back to the abbess, the woman said, "He didn't answer my question." "Quite the opposite," said the abbess. "He gave you the most precise answer he could at this time. When he sweeps, his true self is the sweeping." There is a way in which who we are is the activity of the moment. We enter that activity fully, aware of our body, emotions, and thoughts. We center into the activity as opposed to being in the control tower, assigning meaning, concepts, and "self" to what's happening here. But in the moment, be the sweeping. In the moment, if you're at work, be that work. And then at the end of work, leave that behind. Then if you're driving home, who you are is the driver. That simple. Who you are if you're making dinner is the cook. If you're eating dinner, you're the eater. If you were the friend and chatting, you're the talker and the friend. And so 'who you are' shifts and changes all day long.

There is no abiding "true self." There is no essence that "This is who I know myself to really be." But we discover who we are throughout the day – each moment, each activity we're doing. The benefit of this full discovery now is that you're up to date with yourself. In awareness of full discovery now, you find out all the different ways that you get coordinated and brought together for this particular moment now. And it's enough just this moment.

If you're holding a baby, you're the caretaker. You're the holder of the baby. The whole sense of self and who you are is very different from if you were caring for the person we hear outside this room who sounds like they are very, very angry. I can hear what seems to be a very loud argument with themselves or with an imaginary person. So here I am, both teaching and caring. What does this person outside need? Can I support them? I'm the one who cares. All these things can go on. We shift and change, and we don't have to carry one sense of self with us to the next experience.

Now I'm teaching. It makes me a teacher. In a few minutes we'll end this session. And then I'm the stage hand. I'm going to move back some of the equipment we have here for the broadcast. And then I'm going on to be something else and something else. There's a fluidity and a peace where there is a deep, noble silence. There is a nobility in not being self-preoccupied, caught in the swirl and thoughts of "this is mine, this is what I am, this is who my true self is." We can carry the thought with us, hold on to it, and have layers of more concepts on top of it.

So enter into the activity that you're doing today. Let that be who you are. Leave everything else that's not needed behind. If you need some of your past, or if you need something else for the activity at hand, you'll know. Hopefully you can know and hold it lightly, and let it just be part of what is here. But chances are that so much of it is not needed.

My suggestion for you today, for the next twenty-four hours, is to enter more fully into the activities you're doing during the day, fully enough that there is not much room for self-preoccupation. Watching yourself, ask "How well am I doing? I'm not doing well enough. People are going to be criticizing me." Instead, let go of all the second layers, the second arrows, the second array of concepts on top. And let yourself become the true self that is the activity of the moment.

See what difference it makes to do that through the day. And I wouldn't be surprised if you do this well, you'll end the day much more settled and happier than if you didn't do it. So I hope you enjoy this day of being your activity of the moment.

Thank you.