

Insight (39) The *Samādhī* of Not-Self

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Welcome to the Insight Meditation Center and this ongoing series on Insight. I can easily imagine that if someone joins this talk today, they don't have the benefit of all the talks that preceded it this year that laid out a gradual path of deepening practice, first with *samādhī* and then with Insight.

With *samādhī*, there are various stages of deepening that we can fall into occasionally. Most of the time we're not there. We're dealing with an everyday mind. But there are times when things become calm and settled enough that we can get absorbed in a deep way with here and now. Then deep states of absorption, joy, happiness, and peace can arise.

The same thing with insight practice. There are stages of insight, just as there are stages of *samādhī*. We are mostly in the more ordinary states of mind with insight. But from time to time, we also have the benefit of *samādhī*, being deeply settled, at peace, and present here and now, with a qualitatively different state of mind than the ordinary everyday mind. And the teachings that are relevant – the perceptions, experiences, the deeper states of mind – are not the same as those that are appropriate for everyday states of mind. That is not always made clear when Buddhist teachings are presented.

It's so easy to make declarative statements about something from the deepest perspective we can have. We can say, "This is how it is." But it's more useful to say, "In particular states of mind, this is how things are." We learn to shift and change our understanding of what's appropriate depending on where we're at.

Buddhist teachings have more to do with not making universal claims about reality, such as declarative statements, "This is how things are." Rather we appreciate deeply how we perceive that the world shifts and changes based on our state of mind. Our understanding of how to navigate and what's useful depends on our states of mind – such as our state of calm – and what's happening with us in our response to that. Buddhist practice is always in response to what's happening. There's a very deep way in which how we perceive the world – and how we perceive ourselves – shifts and changes based on our state of mind. Some of you have probably had the experience of being in a particular mood and noticing how it colors how you understand yourself. For example, if you have a nice meditation, a walk in the park, a nice time with your friend, you can see that your mood shifts, and how you understand yourself and relate to yourself changes as well.

When you hear Buddhist teachings and they don't make sense to you, there might be a good reason they don't make sense. Maybe they're not meant for the particular state of mind that

you have at that point. One of the ways you can hear Buddhist teachings is to imagine what state of mind are these teachings useful for. Maybe if you have that state of mind, then they will be useful. If they're not useful right now, you can store them away for the future.

All of this is a way of introducing the talk today. We've been reflecting all this time with *samādhī*, with insight. So imagine yourself deeply settled and at peace. Imagine that you have no concerns about anything. All your concerns are put aside for now. You're on vacation or a day off, or you're at the park, and you've had a nice meal, a nap, nice times with people, and now you feel quite content, happy, and peaceful. You sit down to meditate, and it's just so good to feel peace and centeredness without concerns about work and family. They are just not present at all. You find yourself sliding down to become more and more calm and peaceful. You slide down into a place where the thinking mind thinks less and less. You find that your world both opens up, in the sense that your mind becomes more peaceful and expansive, but it also becomes simpler, just here, maybe just here with the body breathing.

You are with the breathing body maybe like a jellyfish in the ocean, expanding and contracting, or maybe like the waves of the ocean rising and falling in swells as they move across the ocean. Gently your breathing rises and falls, and you watch it like you would watch the waves on the beach. You're just there. Nothing else needs to happen.

As you do this, you might see that you leave the world of the present moment: the shifting, changing breath. Maybe you get involved in thoughts and concerns where you're the primary character. What people said to you, what they did to you, what you should do, what's going to happen. You can watch: "Wow, I'm going to lose this peace if I pick up that concern. And I don't need to right now. I'll get to that later. No, thank you." Then you start also seeing that not only do you lose the present, but picking up the idea of "me, myself, and mine" actually has stress in it. There's a discomfort in it. You're so peaceful and calm, why pick up that discomfort?

From this vantage point of deep peace, you see how often we attribute "me, myself, and mine" unnecessarily into the situation. And you start seeing that with every inhale, there's no need to attribute self to it. That's an extra layer of thinking, of cognition. If you want, of course it's you. Of course, it's part of who you are. But there's no reason to get involved in it. In the direct experience of breathing in, you see there's no self to be made out of it. There's no need to attribute a self.

That's "not self." It's just nature. It's nature breathing in. Nature has made breathing creatures for a long, long time. There have been mammals that have been doing this for a long time. And now it's your turn to have this mammalian instinct to inhale and exhale. There is no need to say, "This is me." It's just nature operating. No self is needed.

And so as we get deeper and deeper into it, it becomes clear that anything that's particular – anything that's not a generalization – any sensation, movements of the body, thought, or sound – any senses that come in any way at all that are particular, not a generalization or a broad category. They are not connected to a story. They are just in and of themselves details – the particularities of the moment-to-moment experience that is shifting and changing. There is no need to pick it up as "self," no need to measure it against ourselves, and no need to create a "self" from it. In this deep state of peace and *samādhī*, we see that every particular

thing is not “self.” That’s not really who I am. That’s not really my true self. That’s not really how I need to define myself by that in-breath. We learn to leave every particular thing alone.

At some point, the deep insight into “not-self” occurs when we turn the attention around 180 degrees. And we see that even the practitioner, the knower that knows “not self,” the awareness that is aware of the present moment, the thoughts that are thinking about the present moment ... That, too, is not self. It is just phenomena rolling through. It is just a thought, a perception. It's very, very simple.

A phenomenal thing that can happen when we are dwelling in this very deep state of peace is that we have no inclination to make a metaphysical view of it. No inclination to make a story and come back carrying the banner of “There's no self.” That's an extra layer. It is suffering to do that. We are just content to allow these things to unfold. We see the 180 degrees – that’s not really around us and in us – the very locus of self – the place where we think the Self is – is also not-self. The feeling of self or am-ness, is also just a feeling, It is just a moment of locus, and that's not self. And we can see all this with deep equanimity,

So that locus of “self” – that little kernel of self, the contraction, pressure, and coagulation of self – has a chance to rest. It has a chance to not always be doing its work of holding on, and it lets go. And a phenomenal peace is discovered when self, the clinging of self, is not there.

When the Buddha describes this, he doesn't describe it from the point of view of a person. He says, “Now the mind, the heart, is liberated through non-clinging.” And the Buddha doesn't say this, but I'll add: “with no self needed” at that moment. In that state and experience of freedom. It's state-specific. Then we don't have to say, “Oh, now I know there's no self.” That's extra. What we know is that from time to time – and maybe more and more – we have the orientation to say, “This is not self. This thought is not self. This feeling is not self. This sound is not self.” You don't have to do this. You don't have to live this way. You don't have to make a philosophy out of it. But as we practice, the practice itself brings us to these stages, the states that are: “That's what we see. That's the insight we have. That's what's revealed.” And it shows us how to be at ease and at peace.

It also, over time, shows how much we shift and change our states of mind. One of the great insights is to appreciate and see that the ordinary state of mind that we normally have, is just a state of mind. It's just what gives a particular perspective on life and ourselves. That's contingent. That's shifting and changing. That's not absolute. Even the ordinary state of mind is impermanent and changing, there because of conditions, and maybe we don't have to lock onto it as “This is who I really am.” We can find freedom instead.

I hope this makes sense. We will have one more talk tomorrow on this insight into not-self. I'll be in a different place tomorrow. I'll be up in the Sierras. I'll be broadcasting from my friend's meditation center, the Mountain Stream Meditation Center. I look forward to broadcasting from there.

Thank you.