

Insight (32) This I Am Not

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Welcome to the continuation of talks on the Insight part of Insight Meditation. Yesterday I started talking about three things that the Buddha instructed us to be very careful about. In the context of meditation, maybe these are not necessary and we don't have to be involved in them. The three things are the notion that "This is mine," taking ownership of something, and having a feeling that has a certain kind of greed.

Today the topic is not to make things into "who I am." This idea that "I am something" can be innocent enough and held lightly. But what I want to focus on today is not that it's inappropriate to say "I am" and have a view that I am a certain kind of way. Instead, how it is a magnet for a lot of unnecessary ideas about "I am."

When I first got involved with meditation – Zen meditation – I liked going to the San Francisco Zen Center to visit because when I talked to more senior experienced practitioners, I would-- as usual and it was almost unconscious--I was playing social games. I was trying to present myself in ways so they would see me in a certain way. They would think I was a good person or a kind person or a capable person or a smart person. I hoped they would like me. I was trying to manipulate or present myself or engage in ways that would get that result.

With my friends, it kind of worked. We all did it. It was just part and parcel of how we were. I had no idea that I was doing it. It wasn't out of scale with how many people can act, at least seemingly.

But when I was at the Zen Center, the senior practitioners there were unresponsive to my attempts. I was amazed. They became mirrors. I saw myself much better in what I was trying to do because they weren't participating in it. I saw how much "self" I was building up. How I was engaged in the process of "selfing."

I think some of us who are old enough to have watched the growth of the "selfie," social media, and smartphones with cameras on them ... It's remarkable to me to have watched how much self-preoccupation has come into play where "me, myself, and mine" is. It becomes bigger and bigger, taking a selfie of oneself wherever we go. You know, we never took selfies. We always took pictures of something else. To put ourselves front and center as the subject of photographs, this was a foreign idea just twenty or thirty years ago.

I see people who are young, who seem to spend an extraordinary amount of time, from my point of view, compared to the past, with posing for photographs. They present themselves in different ways, having certain clothes that are a little bit more glamorous, very much concerned about how they are presented, who they are, concerned with how many friends they have on Instagram. All this concern with self has grown in a way that would have been unbelievable for me when I was in my twenties. And so, in a sense, it's a growing preoccupation with self: who I am, how I appear.

I also see it in the way some people talk. It seems so natural to them. It's like no one has an accent. No one in their hometown. No one for themselves has an accent. Everyone else has accents. It's just the normal part of way of speaking.

in the same way, the normal way of being self-concerned and self-preoccupied is such an integral part of society and of oneself, that people don't even see it. I'm a little bit astounded sometimes how many people, when they talk, are constantly using the word "I," constantly being self-referential. My impression is that that has increased over the decades, not decreased.

I think that the advent of the Web and social media and all kinds of other things has increased people's self-concern about their presentation – who they are, how popular they are. It is tiring. It is a strain, it is fragile. And so, whether I'm accurate in seeing whether these things have increased over time in certain cultures I've traveled in, it seems like some cultures are more self-preoccupied than others.

For the Buddha, there's a conceit that we add on top of any innocent idea of “I am something. I am this old, I am of this gender, I am of this nationality and ethnicity, I am of this educational background.” There are many things in this profession that are accurate enough.

But once we say it and live in it, it becomes a magnet for conceit. And conceit is stressful. Conceit is extra work. It is tiring. And so conceit is selfish.

Part of Buddhist practice or insight practice is to start seeing, knowing, and recognizing the extra layer of conceit and stress that is on top of the innocent idea, “I am.” And the Buddha went on to say that anything that you can say that's really specific – that you can specifically see, touch, or feel – is extra to add on top of it, “I am this.”

Right now I am sitting. And there's not really any stress that “I am a sitter”. It's accurate enough to say, but it's a little bit awkward to say it because we don't usually say that in English. It comes out of my tongue kind of effortful.

And why would I need to say it? Why is that important news for the world that I am a sitter, that that is my current status? It feels like a little extra in the moment to say it.

If I'm sitting in meditation and the thought repeatedly comes up, “Boy, am I a sitter, I'm a good sitter, I'm the best sitter,” or “I'm a lousy sitter.” It starts to take me away from my direct experience. It starts putting on layers and layers of stress on top of the present moment experience.

I'm not wanting today to deny the value of statements that say, “I am X, I am something.” But it's the layers of tension and extra that we put on top of it and the preoccupation with it which takes us away from our direct experience. And so the Buddha encouraged people, especially in meditation I believe, to do the opposite.

To not be caught up in “I am this.” To not live in “I am this-ness.” Let “I am whatever” just be there in the background because any preoccupation with it interferes with a deeper kind of presence and peace that's possible in meditation.

So part of the “insight” of insight meditation is to see that stress, to see how being caught up is extra. Certainly there are times that “I am this” is appropriate to say, but maybe think of it as a jacket you put on and take off. If you have a profession, then when you're doing the work, you can say, “I am this.” When you're not doing the work, maybe take off the jacket.

It is not that important to say unless there's a neighbor who needs help. You can say, “Well, I'm a plumber, I can help” so the neighbor has some confidence in you. But to not sew your “am-ness” into the very fabric of who you are. Rather see it as just a light jacket you're wearing that you put on and take off as needed.

But to be very sensitive, I am not saying you should never have to say, “I am anything” or have that idea for yourself. But to notice the stress that's added – the clinging, the conceit, how it becomes wind drag, how it becomes unnecessary.

There's an unnecessary amount of selfing going on. So one of the ways that might be interesting for you – it's a little difficult to do, especially in English, if that's what you speak. But what you might try doing for the next twenty-four hours in a way that other people maybe don't notice. You don't have to make it a big over-effort.

Attempt to use the words “I,” “me,” and “myself” less in your conversations, or maybe less in your writing. Maybe you could try for today at least to avoid a lot of talk about “me, myself, and mine.” And see how that is. See how it affects you.

You might reword some sentences. Instead of saying, “I am cold” – it’s fine to say that – but for this exercise, say something like, “Wow, it’s cold here.” Of course, everyone understands that you’re cold. But you’re not putting the focus on you. You’re putting the focus on the situation.

Or someone says they’re cold. And you could immediately follow up to empathize with them. You might say, “I’m cold, too.” But least for today, try not to follow up with “I am.” Just say, “Oh, should we go stand in the sun?” so that you’re responding to them but you’re not being self-referential. So try it today, for the next twenty-four hours, and see what you learn.

It might be very hard, so maybe you do it in small pieces. Maybe you take five or ten minutes here and there where you try to do it this way and exercise this. And then see what difference it makes in the conversation, and in the relationship to others, and more importantly, in yourself. I suspect that if you do it all day, at first it’s going to be very difficult. It’s going to be tiring. But maybe by the end of the day, you’ll go to sleep more at ease. Something will have relaxed deeply.

Thank you very much.