

Insight (31) Mine Without Craving

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Welcome to this Monday where we are continuing a longer series on “insight” – what the meaning of insight is in insight meditation. The core meaning has to do with having three profound observations. These are three profound ways of seeing deeply into our experience that we call “insights.” The one we’re focusing on right now is the insight into “not self.” This term is very easy to get more complicated than it needs to be, because the “self” is a hugely important topic for most people. People have a sense that they exist as a unique individual, somewhat autonomous, who makes choices for themselves.

As we get closer to the core idea, I want to continue the insight into “not-self” by taking a little different tack in the next few days. That is to emphasize how much extra we add on top of “self.” I don’t want to posit “There is a self” or “There is not a self” right now. What I want to do is to emphasize that even if there is a self – or even if there is not a self – there are layers of extra ideas and reactions that come with having these opinions. There might be innocent ways of understanding this idea, but most of us are not so innocent because we pile things on top.

It’s a little bit like if you’re going to go for a backpacking trip or a long day hike. You want to travel as light as you can. You try not to take anything extra with you so that you have the least weight. Any extra weight adds more stress and makes the trip more difficult. So you try to omit anything that’s extra.

There are some people who do what is called “through hikes.” They go for long days, maybe months at a time, backpacking. They’ve managed to buy the lightest possible backpacking gear. They really try to reduce their weight radically, almost to the point where ounces count as they sort through this.

Imagine that instead of that, you feel like you need to bring everything along for all possible contingencies, maybe even for a two-hour hike in the mountains on a clear, nice day. And so you bring a few suitcases with you with your raincoat, rain boots, and umbrella. And maybe you should have a sleeping bag and extra food and lots of water, because who knows what’s going to happen. So you’re carrying four different suitcases. After a while you realize that’s too heavy. So what you do is you carry two for a while, put them down, then you go back and get the other two, and you bring them along. You’re going along with all this.

But each suitcase weighs maybe fifty or sixty pounds. You’re trying to make your way doing a nice little two-hour hike in a park where there are lots of people. The roads are nearby and you could easily get out. All that stuff is not needed. In fact, it is better to go on a hike and put aside ideas of, “I should have brought more, I should have had this and that. Next time I’m going to bring more, I’m going to bring this and that.” We can be so preoccupied with what we bring with us that we don’t really enjoy the hike.

Part of the joy of hiking is to drop all our concerns, and to just be present in the natural world in a very simple way without a lot of extra thoughts, ideas, associations, and relationships we have to take care of, as well as duties we have to do at home. Hiking can just become simple and so nice.

With this comparison, the idea of “self,” independent of whether there is or is not a self, can come with a lot of baggage. The idea can come with luggage we carry along with it.

One piece of luggage that the Buddha emphasized is that he said if we have opinions about the self, that's a burden. That's “baggage” in my language. He called it “suffering.” As a philosophical concept, opinions about “self” just get you mired in quicksand. They make things so much more complicated, especially if you develop a very strong opinion.

For the Buddha, a strong opinion that “There is a self” is suffering. It's extra. Also, a strong opinion that “There is no self” is also extra. It's an opinion, and it's suffering. Holding on tight to these ideas is suffering. And so part of what we do in mindfulness practice is not rush to understand “not-self.”

The whole idea of insight into not-self is not a belief or something you need to understand. For example, it is just like reading a book about swimming. You don't need to only understand swimming. You have to swim, and you have to learn to float. It gives you what you need to know about swimming. You have to learn for yourself.

Maybe this analogy isn't perfect, but hopefully it's good enough. We are looking for a deep insight, not an understanding. So don't struggle with the understanding of the concept of not-self. But rather, for today, understand what's extra: what you add on to the idea of self.

One of the earliest teachings of the Buddha, (as far as we can tell what's early), is that he didn't emphasize his teaching on not-self. The comparable thing that he emphasized is not being selfish, because being selfish is suffering – suffering for ourselves, and it might be suffering for others as well. Selfishness is a clinging, a preoccupation with something. There is a lot of extra baggage when there is a kind of gathering together and holding on tightly to “me, myself, and mine,” and being excessively preoccupied and not be able to see the full picture we're in because we're so self-consumed with the conceit of self.

So the Buddha emphasized that this is what we want to let go of: this extra selfishness. More often than teachings about not-self, the Buddha taught that we want to understand and be very careful not to add craving on top of any ideas of self, not to add conceit on top of any ideas of self, and not to add any kind of metaphysical opinion, view, or doctrine on top of the idea of self.

The way the Buddha said this, he referred to his little teaching that if you say, “This is mine,” and there's craving involved – “This is mine” as my possessiveness – then there is suffering and stress. If you have the idea that “This I am” and there's conceit around the I am-ness, that is suffering. And he said, if there's this opinion – this view or doctrine – I know what the self is: this is the self, this is the true self, like the soul, this is the soul ... if you hold on to that view, that's extra baggage – that's suffering. Right? So when the Buddha taught, he said it's more useful to see things through the lens, “This is not mine. This is not who I am. This is not myself, my soul, my essence.”

Why is that useful? Because of all this craving, conceit and being opinionated that we add on top of things. Instead, we can start seeing it. So the first one, “This is mine.” What is really brilliant about this, when the Buddha was teaching, he was always pointing to something specific. He was always pointing to something in detail. “This thing is not mine,” as opposed to saying, “nothing is mine.” The Buddha tended not to make broad abstractions. He was always very particular and concrete.

As an example, looking at this bell that is next to me and that I use, I could easily see this bell and say “It's not mine. It belongs to IMC. I know who gave it to us, and it was a gift, and I appreciate it. And it belongs to IMC. It's not mine. So because it's not mine, I'm not going to take it home with me. I'm not going to be concerned about how I'm going to pack it and all the wonderful things I'm going to do with it as I take it home. It's just a bell that sits here, that I can use.” And I don't make it into my own.

There are innocent ways in which we can see things as being mine. But the idea that we possess it and own it, comes along with the idea that we control it, we can manipulate it, we can make it as we want it to be.

As another example, I could say “This is meditation is my joy. How could people be interrupting and disturbing my meditation? The neighbor has their leaf blower blowing one more time. Don't they know that they're

disturbing my meditation?" So I've claimed the meditation for myself. "This is my thing to have control over, to take care of, to protect."

So there starts to be these layers of complications. They are extra, as opposed to just sitting here breathing with a loud leaf blower going. I could be very simple with it. This is the present moment. We can learn to let go of the extra layers, the baggage we carry along with it.

Part of that baggage is the idea of mind. And so you might, as we go through the day today, do an exercise – do some study of this issue of mind. This whole idea of the Buddha's teachings of not-self – it's best if you slowly ease into it through a deep self-study. You can really understand how your experience is right here, as opposed to just listening to the words and ideas and arguing with them or just thinking about them.

In order to see the personal experience that lays the foundation for this deeper insight, I suggest that you spend the next twenty-four hours looking and seeing if you could understand where the concept of "mine" comes into play. My emotions, my feelings, my opinions, my car, my things, my time. You know, it's all the my, my, my that we do. And it might be innocent the way you do it. But see what's extra. See what you add to it. See if there's any attachment, craving, or stickiness that this idea of "my and mine" comes along for you. And then tomorrow we'll continue easing our way into the insight into not-self.

Thank you.