

Self No Self

Gil Fronsdal

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There are several reasons why it's nice to sit a longer retreat rather than a real short one. And one reason is that you sit, like, just for a week, and sometimes it's quite difficult, and you just may be coping more with the pain or whatever, and that's what you see. But if you sit longer, then maybe the difficulty kind of opens up, and there's a period of calm. Mental states and conditions change. And then if you sit even longer than that, other things start happening and become difficult. Different mind states come in, and with time you learn how impermanent mind states are, and that with impermanence you can see there's no self.

These things come in and go, and even in the course of one day, you can see how your mind states come up out of your control. What you're experiencing, some periods of the day you feel good, some periods of the day you feel tired, or whatever changes. And then one of the insights that's pretty common is to realize how impersonal some of these mental states can be. A lot of your thoughts you've had this retreat are kind of out of your control. And that's the subject of this evening's talk. I want to talk about self and no self a little bit.

And there's a story that's told sometimes about a feminist who went to a talk on Buddhism, and the person, probably a man, was talking about the teaching of no self in Buddhism, and how the ego or the self is really the basic problem. And what's needed is to dismantle the ego, dismantle the self, and really penetrate through this, that there's no self at all. And the feminist said, "Boy, it sounds like a real great religion for men." The women laugh. And the subject of self and no self, the subject is a complicated one, is often misunderstood. And I think even both in Western thought and Eastern thought and Buddhist thought, the whole idea of self, the concept of self, is very confusing, and there's a lot of abstraction, so a lot of discussion about it is not very clear.

And part of the reason for that is that the idea of self is just that. It's an idea. It's an abstraction. It's a thought construct. There's nothing in your direct experience you can point to and say,

"This is a self." And so if you talk about a self, and you can't point to what it is, well then no one can agree. Hence two philosophers have a great time.

And often enough, the teaching of no self in Buddhism is misunderstood, and people take it on almost like a belief system or a dogma, perhaps, resulting in a certain kind of self-effacement, unnecessary self-effacement. And so occasionally it results in people abandoning personal responsibility. It hasn't been so much the problem in recent years, but I think in the sixties and seventies there were a lot more people who went all out and were maybe a little fundamentalist about some of the Buddhist teachings and the Buddhist tradition. If you read the scriptures, the different things that Buddhism has to say about the subject of self and non-self, if you just scan it, it seems maybe that, God, there are contradictory teachings about self. And certainly the teaching of no self is really one of the core teachings of all Buddhism, and even Buddhists go back to it, talking about it over and over again.

And I've resisted talking about it too much in my talks in the West because I just heard it too much in Asia, at least, people talk about it over and over again. But then there are such statements in the scriptures, like talking about the *Eightfold Path*, a path of practice, and saying, "This is the path by which those with great selves have fared. This is the path by which those with great selves have practiced, have found their way." And there's discussion of *arahants*, awakened beings, having great selves, having great selves. And then there are more psychological teachings and talks about lowering, lowering the flag of I, lowering the flag of conceit, this flag that we hang up and fly out so people can see who we are. And then there are such teachings as maybe many of you have heard: develop a self like a lamp. Develop a self like an island. Be a lamp to yourself. Be an island unto yourself. Be your own refuge. Make yourself your own refuge.

And then, in addition, and that is a most important kind of Buddhist teaching to hold together with the teaching of no self, there's a tremendous stress that Buddhist teaching puts on personal responsibility. The precepts, and the way the precepts are understood, the stress on the precepts, the stress on the consequences of our actions in the world, they put a tremendous stress on the person, on the individual, in some way. So all these different ways of talking about the self have in some way to be held together. So tonight's talk is about self and no self, and I'd like, if it's possible for you, to think of it as a continuation of my last talk about the mindfulness of the body. And I think maybe one of the better foundations for understanding the teaching of no self is coming from having really developed and cultivated a strong sense of mindfulness of the body.

And perhaps it's a kind of paradox that in reunifying or recollecting, remembering the body, and the body when it comes completely into its own, there is simultaneously a kind of forgetting of the self. So there are two ways that the Buddhist tradition has talked about the teaching of self and no self, or many ways, but about no self. They wanted to describe it, and one is the philosophical or the metaphysical way, and the other way is the psychological way. And if you're interested in the philosophical or metaphysical way, you can go to graduate school and have your professors not explain it to you. And the other way, which is the psychological, which is the way that most Buddhist practitioners and teachers are really concerned about, the philosophical side is really not that interesting, perhaps, as the psychological teaching of self and no self.

And in talking about self and no self from a psychological point of view, the interest is in investigating, understanding attachment, especially attachment to self and self-identity. How we construct a self and self is a teaching of selfishness. Selflessness is, in part, an antidote to our attachment, and it's said, to paraphrase slightly: selflessness is the cure for all attachment. The teaching of no self is a cure for all attachments. However, the attachment to selflessness is the greatest illness. Be careful. And the question of whether a self really exists or whether a self really doesn't exist, it really isn't that important of a question.

The really important question is, is there attachment to self? And understanding the attachment, penetrating the attachment, is much more interesting than whether there is or isn't. So from looking at the teaching of self or no self from a psychological point of view, we're interested in, perhaps we can say, overcoming barriers, the limitations that are imposed on us by our use of identification with various concepts or ideas of who we are, the limitations of conceit, the conceit of I. And I think we all know that we identify with a lot of things. We think a lot of things are who we are, important parts of who we are, and we can't do without them. And we identify, you know, we find our self-worth in such things as perhaps our work, or our professional status, or in money, or our attractiveness, or intelligence.

And on retreat, you see it, you know, all the time. We identify with things and think, "This is who we are," and it becomes a big problem. One example is tiredness. For example, tiredness arises, and if you think, "I am tired," the tiredness is me, you probably end up with a big problem. But if you just see tiredness as a phenomenon that arises and passes, and you see there is tiredness, and you know tiredness, and you don't identify with it, then tiredness doesn't have to be a problem at all.

The issue of self was central to me in my years of practice, and it's one in kind of now, in retrospect, I can see how the issue of self reappeared over and over again in my practice,

partly spurring me on and partly opening up new vistas and understanding to me. And it's kind of like to be one of the main threads, and the various doors into a Buddhist practice, and the various doors that people take, and the teaching or the understanding of no self is one of those doors that seems to be one of my more regular doors into Buddhist practice. My first interest in Buddhism and first inkling I had of interest in it was in my freshman days. I was the extreme pacifist among my fellow students, and I was always defending my pacifism, so I was quite concerned about it. And as I was more and more, I realized at some point that in order to follow through my idealism, I had to be willing to put my life on the line, to put myself in a situation where, you know, some kind of act of civil disobedience, where maybe my life was threatened.

And I realized that I was really attached, and I was really afraid of doing something like that. And because I was so idealistic, perhaps I felt that that was a tremendous limitation, and I felt like I needed to do something about that. That was something I had to confront or deal with, that fear of losing my life. When I first started sitting regularly, I was living with some friends out on a rural farm, and there were just the three of us. I started sitting every morning before breakfast, and I would sit and become quite quiet, and fairly content, and I had the feeling somehow that this regular sense of I understood myself just wasn't there. And so I'd come down to breakfast, and I'd still feel somewhat calm and content, and not in some ways. I felt even there, but the old Gil just wasn't quite there.

And what happened over the next few weeks, actually the next week or two, was the tension at the breakfast table started going up, getting higher and higher and higher. And my friends expected the old Gil to be there, and it was difficult enough. I couldn't quite make the adjustment. I didn't know how. They didn't know how. And I felt, well, either I have to lose my friends or I have to stop sitting. And I chose at that time to stop sitting because I didn't know what to do. It was too difficult.

And then when I started sitting more regularly again, after about a year, I started sitting every day, twice a day. And when I first started sitting then, I had all these reasons why I wanted to sit. I wanted people to like me more. I wanted to become a better person. I thought I'd have more friends, and all kinds of fine reasons. You're laughing. Oh, maybe you've been there too.

And so I sat for some months, and a strange thing happened, and that was I noticed that my reasons for sitting started to kind of drop off one by one, until a point where I didn't have any more reasons for sitting. And I thought that was really strange, because I'm kind of a rational person, and I have to have reasons for what I do. And what was really strange was

I kept sitting. I kept sitting twice a day, every day. This is really basic. Why am I doing this? And I spent a lot of time thinking, why am I doing this?

And finally, after some time, what popped in my mind, the kind of understanding that I had, or just the way I described it to myself, was that sitting had become for me the deepest form of self-expression that I had, and that I sat in order to express myself in the way that an artist might express herself or himself on the easel or the piano, whatever. And as I sat, I kind of came back to that place. And looking back at that time, I think I couldn't count fully at that time in many ways, the way I sat. And one way is that I knew virtually nothing about Buddhism, and I knew virtually nothing about meditation. I didn't know anything about that. Maybe I had some assumption to get concentrated. I didn't know what mindfulness was. I didn't know about the *Seven Factors of Enlightenment*.

I kind of thought meditation was just sitting in one place and just accepting what was happening. I didn't know that maybe you're supposed to be quiet, not think so much. I didn't know anything. I just sat, and it was a kind of leaving myself alone. It was kind of a lucky time. Later, you know, I started learning these various things, concentration, and then I'd try to do something, and I stopped leaving myself alone. And there's a certain perspective, maybe these teachers shouldn't hear this, there's a certain perspective from which what we've been doing this last week has been a disservice to you, even teaching you all this practice and things to do.

And can I continue here? Because it's possible to have a lot of expectations, and come into practice with all these expectations. And I think what we're trying to do here is not to develop expectations in your mind, but rather somehow lay out the territory of our humanity, what can happen to us, of our experience, so that we can learn to recognize it better when it occurs. And looking back at that time in my life, there was some purity in the way I sat. However, there was a lot of stuff I didn't recognize, and as a result, you know, I was kind of miserable at times. I also remember my first sittings, first longer sittings.

The frustration would build the first days. You know, it was difficult, and I'd get more angry. But I was the kind of person who was not supposed to get angry, and I couldn't see it. I didn't allow myself the privilege of acknowledging, recognizing that I was angry, and I was really miserable, until finally I reached rock bottom, and I just lay there. There was nothing else to do but say, "Gee, I'm angry." So, you know, what we're doing here is laying things out to help you learn to recognize what's actually present, not to set up some expectation.

And again, in the second time that I started sitting, except that I kept sitting again, I felt a sense of self-expression. Another way I may be saying it was a kind of personal integrity. I

felt a certain kind of integrity when I sat that I didn't feel in my normal life. And two things I noticed, or two things resulted. One was that again, I found it difficult to be with my normal friends because I kind of wanted to be in a new way in the world. I wanted somehow to live from that integrity that I felt in sitting, and they were kind of still into their habits, and expected me to still be into my old habits. And it was kind of awkward.

And the other thing I noticed was it was very difficult to learn to bring the practice into my daily life, to learn to practice the same kind of mindfulness and kind of resting in some kind of trust or some kind of inner integrity that I felt in sitting. And then I went to a Zen center, and it was quite nice, because I found all these Zen students. I'd go to see them, and you know, I still had my trips for sure, and so I came with my trips, and there was no response. They were like a mirror and all that. This is really great. I'm seeing myself really clearly reflected in these people, because they're not responding. They're not plugging into the way, playing the game. But that was really great. So I decided to go there and live there, kind of learn from these people, and I learned a lot. That was really great.

But I stayed there for many years. And I stayed there long enough to learn that it wasn't that these people were particularly wise. They were just kind of aloof, but they served me early well. I think that most people, at some point in their practice, some point or other, will begin realizing how much work is involved in maintaining a structure which defines the self, our identity. And because our identity, the thing, our identification, the conceptual sense of who we are, the self as it is, is a mental construct, we constantly have to reinforce it. We constantly have to rebuild it and create it. And it's a lot of work.

It's work for the body. Sometimes our identity is in our body, our posture, and we hold ourselves in a certain way. We go about, we do all kinds of activities because we want to reinforce a certain identity we have. We want people to see us in a certain way, so we do certain things so they see us in certain ways. We judge ourselves when we don't match our expectations of who we think we should be. Two things happen on retreat, in a retreat like this, or in practice like this. One is, it doesn't really involve so much mindfulness practice itself, but involves just leaving ourselves alone, not adding anything.

One Zen master I talked to said, "Don't put another head on top of your own." We just leave ourselves alone. And in leaving ourselves alone, all the kind of structures that we put together to kind of control life begin to settle away. And often in the silence, you know, just if we came together here for ten days in complete silence and didn't even sit at all, I think because so much of our sense of self is tied up in speech and talking and in relationships that involve speech, only if we spent ten days in silence, I think we'd leave ourselves alone. And we'd

have a different sense of who we are than before we came. And then we have the mindfulness practice on top of it.

And as we become more mindful and start recognizing and seeing deeper layers of ourselves, we see how some of our thoughts work, and we see the repeatedness of our thoughts, and it becomes, in some ways, a challenge to our thoughts, to our construct, to our ego. And I think it's also quite common for people, and it certainly happened to me, that as the mind becomes quiet, and as these normal structures of the mind, the thought patterns of the mind, settle down or are not there anymore, then a period of calm, a fear can arise. It can start to be frightening. Suddenly you realize, you know, what's going to happen now? I mean, you know, not understanding. You'd feel disoriented, because the normal way of seeing and understanding oneself and the world somehow aren't there anymore, holding us up and supporting us.

And maybe it's frightening. And it was frightening for me. And I find it kind of remarkable, it was remarkable, you know, when I reflected on it for myself, that I could get afraid sitting on a retreat like this. Nothing in particular was happening. There were nice people all around me, and nothing really was particularly threatening. And I was sitting there, and fear would arise because I didn't know who I was. The old sense of Gil wasn't there, and nothing else was happening. It was a completely safe place.

The Buddhist teaching on self and no self, and in particular conceit, has a new one, which I sometimes don't recognize so well in the West perhaps, and that is one in Buddhist terms. Conceit involves not just thinking of oneself as superior to others, but it also involves thinking of ourselves as inferior to others, and it involves thinking of ourselves as being equal to others, all three. And you might ask yourself, what would it be like to live in the world and not think of yourself as either superior, inferior, or equal? And I think the understanding is that even if you have an idea that you are less than someone else, still there's the comparison judgment. There's still a sense of self that you have, that you're placing as certain. You're thinking of yourself as a thing, as an object, which then you're defining in a certain way, identifying in a certain way. And that's not necessary to do at all.

And if you see yourself as equal, that's not necessary. That's also kind of extra to go around with this thought, you know, how can I be equal? And sometimes in the West we hear talk about people who have a weak sense of self, and you need to kind of build up a sense of self because your sense of self is weak. And I think that often, I don't know about all the time, but often that's actually, from the Buddhist perspective, not actually so. Whether you have a weak sense of self or a strong sense of self, the sense of self is quite entrenched, actually, as a quite strong sense of self in either case. Someone who is codependent, who identifies them-

selves with someone else, we might think of as having a weak sense of self. And someone who's really proud and arrogant and self-aggrandizing, we think they have a strong sense of self. But both people are creating a strong identity and just putting it in different places.

And rather than building a stronger sense of self for the person who has a weak sense of self, one of the possibilities we have is of simply letting go or relaxing the need for identity entirely, so we can rest in some basic ground of goodness or of completion or fullness. And it was a surprise to me to realize that things like shyness involve a tremendous strong sense of self. If you are very shy, there's a very strong sense of self there. And then we have, yes, a whole market, it's probably a billion-dollar market in the United States, on building self-esteem. There's workshops and tapes and books, all these things you can do to build self-esteem. And I'm not saying it's a bad idea. Perhaps it's a good idea sometimes.

But often that's just adding another construction, and you have to do all these empowerment words and phrases, and it's just adding all this stuff you have to do. It's more work, and it's fine to do your work. But what you end up with is a certain tension, and you have to maintain the tension. The tension is, you have a poor sense of self-worth, and you counteract it with an antidote of saying phrases and doing all the stuff to feel your self-worth, your self-esteem. Those two are going to be held, and often in a kind of tension, and you have the kind you go through life with, this tension between the two. And it's possible, again, to drop them both and find your fundamental sense of wholeness or completeness.

And I wonder sometimes about religious practice, sometimes a devotional practice. They talk sometimes about humility, developing humility, and I wonder if that's really necessary also. There's a poem by Emily Dickinson, which maybe kind of reflects the great relief it can be to stop maintaining a strong sense of self. She says:

"Nobody. Who are you?
Are you nobody too?
Then there's a pair of us. Don't tell.
They'll banish us. You know how dreary to be somebody,
How public like a frog
To tell your name the livelong June
To an admiring bog."

I'm nobody. She has an explanation point after that, nobody. And when I read this poem, I felt that she had all this confidence. She was saying this with tremendous confidence. One way of understanding the practice, which is often talked about, is that it's deepening layers

of trust, a process of deepening trust, and learning that we can trust our life, trust who we are, without having to add a lot of constructions and a lot of ideas and a lot of activity to hold up a certain idea of who we are. And we learn slowly in the practice that it's trustable to be here, and we trust. And when we meet, we come across our lack of trust, our lack of acceptance, our fears, and we don't have to let go of those.

We find one of the remarkable things to find out is that you can trust being really present for your fear. You can trust being present for your non-trust. We trust that. And eventually trust becomes so pervasive that maybe it can't even be called trust. It's no longer trusting. To say trust is to say too much. It's adding another extra piece of baggage. So the teaching of no self is a teaching of trust, at least in my mind. Just to be alive is enough.

And perhaps because of this, Buddhism is less interested in the question of the meaning of life as it is in understanding the need we have for meaning. Where does the need for meaning come from? And a lot of people spend a lot of time searching for meaning, and that may be a good idea. I'm not going to say it's not. But they never take a backward step and ask, what about, where's this need for meaning coming from? What's that about? So an awakened person is called a great self.

And I think that there's some way in which maybe you have a sense of it in this retreat already, that if you drop down into your body and abide in your awareness, allow your awareness to be present, to suffuse your body and be in your emotions, that there's a kind of openness, a kind of expansiveness of an awareness. Where is your awareness? I asked a few nights ago, where is it? And I think that awareness has some unlimited, immeasurable aspect to it. It has no boundaries. In some ways, we become kind of great in a sense.

There is a quote from the Buddha. He says, "A grain of salt does not make the Ganges undrinkable, but it does make a cup of water undrinkable." When we have a small sense of self that identifies and says, "This is who we are. This is who I have to be," and we run around trying to maintain that, something that irritates it or frustrates us makes us quite angry. But someone who has a great sense of self, the same irritant now just comes. You don't get rid of the irritant. It's just a way of holding it, just like the Ganges holds salt without changing its taste. And perhaps the great self that we develop, can it also be understood as having a healthy sense of self?

And it isn't that we lose all sense of who we are. And a healthy sense of self includes understanding our qualities and our capacities, our potentials, our limitations, our relationship to the world, the consequences of our actions. All those come into the field of awareness and give us, in some sense, a healthy sense of who we are. I'd like to mention briefly, partly

because I started with mentioning feminism, that the teaching of no self sometimes isn't so appropriate for some people in our culture, not just sometimes for women, but many women more often than not. And the flip side of no self, I should mention, is an empowerment, a kind of empowerment, that as we learn to trust, and as we learn to kind of relax the structures that we have, then deeper movements begin to move within us, and we can feel empowered. It's not just simply a matter of giving up, letting go.

So I'd like to say that again, that the teaching of no self is not something to believe at all. Please don't believe it. Rather, I think that it's important to make some mention of it for people who are practicing, because as we practice, the process of it, the process of practice, is understanding in new ways, ever new ways, that so much of our life is not personal, in some ways not self. It comes together from conditions, impermanent. And so rather than a teaching, no self is a process of understanding that gets stronger and deeper and wider. Don't set up the teaching, any teaching, as an ideal. Really what we're interested in here is staying and meeting the actual, being with the actual, regardless of whether it looks like an ideal or not.

And I would like to just mention a kind of maybe metaphor for mindfulness practice, which I like, which has been useful for me, is when we do mindfulness practice, we want to meet our experience, meet the moment, the present, fully, be there completely for it. And it's sometimes easy when you're noting for the noting to become mechanical, and you kind of just gently kind of note something, and you're off to the next thing, and we haven't really been present for something. You think you've noted it, because you think you've been present because we've noted it, but the noting is kind of just, you bounce off it. You're off to the next thing. Be there really fully for something.

And the analogy is like meeting a friend. I think we all know what it's like to meet someone, and they are either present for us or not present for us. And we want to offer our presence to our experience, just like we offer our presence to a friend. You know, like when we shake hands with someone, and sometimes you shake hands at a party, when they say hello and they put out their hand. By the time their hand is in your hand, they're off looking at the next person, and you have this limp hand. That's kind of, that's not all we want to do in mindfulness practice. We want to be there fully and shake hands, be there with our experience in a friendly way, be there fully, and then step by step, we learn not to be so limited by what we're present for, not to identify or attach to it.

So now I get to my poem. This is a poem by a woman, but she writes it as if she was a father. And it's in a book called *Zen and the Art of Changing Diapers*. This practice can be done

everywhere. Her name is Sarah Arsén.

So the father says, "In my room at last, I'm finally free
to sleep my sleep and dream my dreams.
Besides your mom, who grows bigger each night
with the new child getting ready to come into our lives,
and I fear with two babes in the house,
I'll have no time at all for me.
How will I sleep to sleep?
I need to be alert in my office every morning,
or be free to walk the solitary paths I love,
or find the time to think my thoughts.
With two like you crying in the night,
asking for water, teddy bears, and who knows what else,
what will I do then?
What will I do?
Just breathe in and out,
and watch my breath go out and in, they say.
The teacher *Thích Nhất Hạnh* tells the tale
of another father chasing down time enough
to satisfy a rowdy son, newborn daughter, wife, and self.
That father meditates on breath and finds some way
to make the time his children take his own time too.
He gently twists and bends the hard dividing line
between my afternoon, your morning,
between work time, play time,
between your time or my time
for all the things to do.
He relaxes the boundaries between me and you.
That father stakes the claim to the days and hours
he spends on baby baths and bottles,
games and tears and grins.
Even midnight time changes as his time too,
so he finds he now has endless time.
Will I be able to do that as well?

Only time and breath will tell.”