



2023-03-04 Selves and Not Self: Morning Talk / Q&A

SPEAKERS

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There's a passage in the canon where some monks are leaving to go to a far distant country where people don't know much about Buddhism. So they go to say goodbye to the Buddha. And he says, Have you paid your respects to Śāriputra?" They said, "Well, no, we haven't." Pay respects to him. So they do. Then he asks them "People in that far distant land are known to be wise, and if they ask you "What does your teacher teach?" What are you going to tell them?" They might say "Well, we want to come a long ways to hear what you would tell them." So very first thing that Sariputta says is "Our teacher teaches the ending of passion." No mention of the Four Noble Truths, no mention of the three characteristics; the ending of passion- because that's the goal of practice. It's through the ending of clinging, ending of craving, ending of passion that the end of suffering is brought about. And it's good to keep that in mind; that all the teachings the Buddha gave are for the sake of ending clinging, ending passion. And so when we think about the topic of not-self, which is the topic for today, the question is how best to approach this topic and how best to use it in a way that leads to the ending of clinging.

01:30

Right up front I want to say, in case zoom goes down and you wanted the take away right away, the takeaway is that when the Buddha is talking about not-self, he's not saying there is no self. The idea, of course is that there is a self. It basically comes down to saying what you are is not the problem, the problem is clinging to your ideas of what you are. And so the not-self teaching is best meant as a tool to approach that issue of clinging and what's interesting about it, even though your ideas about what you are a part of the problem leading to suffering; we're going to be using your ideas of what you are as part of the solution. So when the Buddha was asked, is there a self, is there no self? He didn't answer.

02:30

There are two passages that are relevant here. One is when the wanderer named Vacchagotta came to the Buddha and asked him that question point blank. Another is where the Buddha is actually talking to the monks as a large group. But Vacchagotta the wanderer he asked the question, the Buddha remained silent, so Vacchagotta got upset and left. Ananda, who was sitting by, asked him, "Well, why didn't you answer him?" The Buddha gives four answers to Ananda. One of which is that "If I'd have said, yes, there is a self, I'd be siding with the eternalists. If I said there was no self, I'd be siding with the annihilationists. Now those are two groups of people who the Buddha said had extreme wrong views. He went on to say "If I said there is a self, would that be in line with the teaching that all dhammas are not self? No. And if I



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said there is no self, this poor wanderer would have been confused; "does the self I used to have no longer exist?" So the Buddha doesn't give any explanation more than that. It is interesting, though that he doesn't say either way that there is a self or there is no self. He's basically saying, no matter how you define yourself, no matter what you say about whether there is or is not a self, it's going to lead to problems, it's going to lead to wrong view. We'll get into a little bit later what some of these issues are.

04:17

The other instance where the Buddha was talking about the issue, this time he was talking not just to the wanderer, he was talking to the monks at large. He was basically saying there are certain questions that are simply not worth paying attention to. And among the questions that are not worth paying attention to are the questions like do I exist? Do I not exist? What am I, How am I? The Buddha says you try to answer these questions you end up either with a view that you have a self, or that you don't have a self; which he calls a tangle of views and a wilderness of views, a writhing of views. And you get entangled with these views and you're not set free. So the whole purpose of the teaching has to be something else besides just coming down to the question of whether there is or is not a self. It's good to look at some of the consequences though of saying, yes, there is a self or no there is no self, why the Buddha would want to avoid answering those questions. Basically, when you say yes, there is a self, whatever you say it is- whether it's permanent or impermanent, form or formless- it's going to become an object of attachment.

05:27

There's a passage and Digha Nikaya 15 where the Buddha lists the various ways in which self can be defined; either as having a form and finite, having a form and infinite, formless and finite, formless and infinite, that pretty much covers all the ground. So each of those cases, you can say either the self already is that way, or it can be made to be that way, or it will naturally become that way, say when you go to sleep, or when you when you die. So those three modes times four types of self gives you 12 self views that you can go for, and the Buddha puts them all aside. He says that when you look at the way they define the self and none of them are really worth going with. Now notice that it's a value judgment he's making here. I want to make this point again and again throughout the day. That the Buddha is less interested in talking about what you are- but talking about the value of judgment of whether something is worth claiming to be self or not self. So the consequences of saying no, there is no self winding around up with a question about; "Well, who's doing the practice, then, and who are we doing this for?" There was a study made years back of infant behavior. And the psychologist noticed that one of the things that makes children the happiest, especially little tiny children, is when they figure out they can do something, and they get a result. And they do it again, and they get the same result. And this is why children start banging away on something drives you crazy. But for them, it's not just the sound. It's the fact that they've learned something about causality, they've learned something that they have some power to have an influence on their environment. And this is the main source of delight for infants. We'll see that this sense of agency is going to be important for doing the path. Because as the Buddha said, you want to be able to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and to delight in developing skillful qualities. This quality delight does not happen when you feel that you are powerless to make a difference. In fact, if you feel like you're powerless, you cannot make a difference through your choices, it leads to depression. Whereas



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the Buddhist making this sense that the path to the end of suffering has to be a path that you delight in.

07:47

So that's the first consequence of saying there is no self it calls into question the whole question of who's doing the practice? Who's going to benefit from it? Secondly, if you had the view, there is no self, what do you do with it? It's kind of a view that you set forth. And then you take on all comers you argue with other people, and then you have to get attached to it. And another consequence of calling into question of who is acting and who's going to receive a result of the action is that it becomes a license for irresponsibility. There was a case in Majjhima 109, where the Buddha is talking about how the aggregates are not-self. And a monk comes up with this question; "If the the aggregates are not-self, then what self is going to be affected by the actions done by what is not-self? In other words there's no agent and there's going to be nobody receiving it, you can do what you want. So to say there is no self can also be used as an excuse for irresponsibility. We also have the practical problem, is that when people meditate and they arrive at a blank state, they convince themselves that they've achieved awakening with the idea that once you see there is no self that is awakening. Then they get stuck at that level. There's also the problem of people saying that, believing that, if you arrive at the view that there is no self then you are awakened. And the Buddha never talks about views as being what you arrive at, even right view is a means to; part of that raft that goes across the river. That has to be abandoned when you get to the other side.

09:36

So these are some of the reasons I think why the Buddha would not want to say there is no self or not want to say there is a self. It is a question that he puts aside. We've got to understand that when he puts a question aside, what does that mean? He saw that there were four ways of answering questions. The first he called categorical, which is where you basically say yes or no across the board. There's the analytical when you have to define the terms. Like in this case, if we're going to give an analytical answer to the question of whether there is or is not a self, you have to say, "Well, how do you define self, what do you mean when you say self?" Third type of question is counter questioning, in other words, before you give an answer to a question, you ask some questions of the person who's asking the question to make sure he's going to understand, or she is going to understand, the answer when you give it. And then the fourth question is just put aside because it's not conducive to the end of suffering. Okay, so when the Buddha was putting this question aside, it meant not only did he not want to give a straight yes or no answer to it, he also did not want to give an analytical answer. And this is an important point, because all too often this is what we're told- that the Buddha would give an analytical answer to the question. In other words, he would say that, yes, you do have a certain kind of self. And no, you don't have another certain kind of self. There are three main theories that you hear, or at least that I'm aware of. And I'd like to go over them. This is more to realize that they actually misrepresent what the Buddha said. The first one is basically says that what the Buddha was negating was the Upanishadic idea of the self. We know that in the Upanishads they had the theory of the self as being equal to the cosmos, or equal to principle behind the cosmos. And so that this was specifically the view that the Buddha was negating he wasn't negating that your sense of- your ordinary sense of you as a separate person. Now, the problem here is that it turns out there is not just one upanishadic view of a self. Remember, I listed those



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twelve views just now: the self as finite, and having a form. infinite, having a form. Finite & formless, infinite & formless. And then each of those three can be multiplied either by: you already are that way, you will become that way naturally at death, or you will make yourself to be that way, which gives you 12 types of views. Out of those 12 types of views, you can find eight of them in the Upanishads. So the Upanishads were not speaking with one voice on what the self is. And also, the Buddha himself never said that the self had to be permanent, to qualify as a self.

12:48

So that's one analytical interpretation that actually misrepresents what the Buddha said. The second one is that he's saying that no, you don't have a separate individual self. But yes, you do have a cosmic or interconnected self. But again, as we said that the Buddha negated all kinds of ways that you could define yourself, no matter how you define yourself, it can become an object of attachment, you're going to attach to a permanent self and temporary self just as much as you can to a permanent self. Or you can attach to an interconnected self just as much as you can to a separate self. Then you run into the added problems that if you are part of this interconnected whole, it means that you cannot gain awakening until everybody else gains awakening. This would mean that the Buddha himself never really gained awakening. And then we have to wait for everybody, even our political leaders to gain awakening before we could get anywhere. Which I don't think it's gonna happen anytime soon. And it turns out the Buddha actually ridiculed the idea of a cosmic self, in no uncertain terms, he says, Wherever there's a sense of self, there has to be the idea of what belongs to self. And if you were the cosmos, that would mean that everything belongs to you. Is that the case? Well, no. If you take your neighbor's car out of his garage and drive down the street, he's not going to be happy. You can't say, Well, this is my car. Nobody's going to recognize that. So that's another view that the Buddha put aside. He's not saying that "Yes, there is a cosmic or interconnected self and no, there is no separate self." That's not one of his answers.

14:31

The third interpretation is one that's similar to the first, this is one that you actually find within some of the old Buddhist texts themselves, and it's still promoted nowadays. It is: for something to be a self it has to be permanent. What you are is the aggregates; the aggregates are impermanent, and therefore you don't have a self. That has some of the same problems that we've encountered with the other two. In other words, the Buddha is basically saying across the board: You don't answer yes or no to the question of whether there's a self. But then you also come up with a separate issue, which is, the Buddha many times in the cannon will be talking about self, we'll be seeing, we'll discuss later in the day, he talks about making yourself your mainstay, making yourself your governing principle; depending on yourself- using this concept of I and mine, "What when I do it will lead to my long term welfare and happiness, when I do this action, what are the results going to be?" We use the concept of I, we use the concept of self quite often, the Buddha does that. So when he's talking about-in terms of self, and there really is no self? Is he lying? It was to answer this question that they came up with the theory of two truths. The idea being that on a conventional level, there is a self but an ultimate level, there is no self. But that's the same as saying that the Buddha would speak in terms of what we call useful fictions. And the word himself had said many, many times, there is no such thing as a



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useful fiction, the idea that somebody could be untrue but beneficial, he had no space for that in his concept of speech.

6:11

You also have the problem, which is that if you are just your aggregates, then what happens to you in nibbāna? The aggregates end with nibbāna, that'd be annihilation, that Buddha was very clear that nibbāna was not annihilation. Finally, one of the arguments that's given to bolster this idea is a passage in Majjhima 148. When the Buddha said, you can look at the different aggregates, take feeling as an example. If you look at your feelings, you can see them arising and you can see them passing away. Therefore you don't see that they are worthy of being called self. This, the argument says, proves that the Buddha felt that the idea of a self must refer to something permanent. But I think the Buddhas here is getting at something else. As we already saw that he has no use for any theory of self, whether it's permanent or impermanent, finite or infinite. But what he is saying in Majjhima 148 is, if you see something arise, that can't be you, because you have to be there before it arises. In the same way, if you see somebody passing away, it can't be you because you're there after passes away. So this means that we don't have to define self as something permanent, but what the Buddha is getting down to is, no matter what, how you answer that question, do I have a self? Do I not have a self? It's going to get you tied up in all kinds of problems. Which leads to the next question, "Well, if the Buddhas's0 not answering that question? What is the question he is answering? And the answer is a question that lies at the basis of discernment, which is "What when I do it will lead to to my long term welfare and happiness, what when I do it will lead to my long term harm and suffering?" In other words, discernment or wisdom here is framed in terms of actions for which you are responsible and for which you will benefit. So, in that case, we look at self not so much as a thing, but as an activity, your activity of creating your sense of self your perception of self. And then the question becomes, "What when I do it, what sense of self is useful, will lead to long term welfare and happiness, what sense of not-self will lead to long term welfare and happiness?" And a sense of your being responsible.

18:41

You can see this very clearly in the Buddha's instruction to Rahula when he introduced Rahula to the dhamma in the sutta, Majjhima 61. It's an important one, the Buddha is laying out all the basic principles of the practice to his son. In one of them he has his son look at his actions before he does them, an action he intends to do while he's doing them, after they're done. And in each case, he uses the concept of I: this action that I intend to do, this action that I am doing, This action that I have done. A sense of I is very important there, you're taking responsibility for your actions.

19:30

So it does play an important role in the path, but you have to use it as a tool. As we'll find out, you use a sense of self on the path when you get to a point where (sorry, I'm watching messages buzzing by) you get to the point where you don't need it anymore, and that's when you drop off senses of self. But in the meantime, you use it as a means; you create a more healthier sense of self that is capable of following the path and is going to benefit from following the path. You use that as your motivation. You use your sense of responsibility to look at your actions and be responsible for your actions. And it's in this way that you can actually follow the



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path. So basically the Buddha is wanting you to see how you create your sense of self as you do this. This is going to give you a lot of insight into the actions that you do, the things that you cling to, and enables you to get past them.

20:31

So again, he wants you to see you create your sense of self as an action. So we get involved in questions about what what you actually are, it distracts attention from the big question, which is the question of action, of how you define yourself. Because as the Buddha said, how you define yourself, you end up, however you define yourself, you limit yourself, except for the case of how you define yourself around the path.

21:06

So now the questions become "What perceptions of self are conducive to long term well being and happiness, and when are they skillful" and "What perceptions of not-self are conducive to long term well being and happiness and when are they skillful?" And here we look at the Four Noble Truths. If you want to understand any of the Buddha's teachings, you have to put them in the context of the Four Noble Truths. In this particular case, questions of self and not self, perceptions of self and not self play different roles depending on which truth you're focused on. Start with the First and Second Noble Truths, you're going to be using the perception of not-self as part of a program to get rid of clinging and craving for the sake of dispassion. You note here, dispassion is a value judgment, you're applying these perceptions to see "Is this something worth holding on to?" When you arrive at dispassion you come to the point where you say "No, it's not worth it." So ultimately, you're going to get to a point where everything is not worth holding on to. However, in the third noble truth, you're going to be letting go of all perceptions. Which means that in that case, you can't have perceptions of self or not-self. If you hold on to either of those perceptions at that point, it prevents you from realizing the third noble truth, which is the cessation of suffering.

22:29

As for the fourth Noble Truth, you'll find that you will be using perceptions of self and not self selectively your sense of self will still have a value here, after all, you are creating a sense of self all the time anyhow, through the process of becoming in which you focus on a desire, develop a sense of you as the person who might be able to attain the desired object, you, the person who will enjoy having the object. And then you as the commentator watching yourself as you're doing this. This is the process of becoming, you're already doing it. So the Buddha says, well, let's put it to use, put it to use to help develop virtue, put it to use to help develop concentration, to help develop discernment. So in this case, the self still has value here, so you don't drop it. But you do train it to be more skillful. Until you reach the point, where you have to apply the perception of not-self to everything, and then you drop that too. Think of the image of the raft, you're going to take the raft across the river, you're on this side of the river, there are trees on this side of the river. But there's a lot of danger here, the other side of the river is safe. So you take the trees from this side of the river. And you take the twigs and take the branches and tie them up, make them a raft. And then you hold on to that raft and you go across the river. And then when you get to the other side, once you reach the other shore, you don't need the raft anymore. In fact, you'd be stupid, the Buddha said, to carry it on your head. So you leave the raft there and then you go on your way. So in the same way, you're going to be using your



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perceptions of self as part of that raft. Because after all, what's the raft made out of? It's made of things you've got on this side of the river, twigs and branches. You can't sit there and wait for the nibbāna Yacht to come and pick you up and take over. So you have to make the raft yourself out of what you've got. So you take what you've got, and try to make it as skillfully put together as possible and you take it across, then you put it aside. So you're going to need the perceptions of not-self for the first and second noble truth, you're going to need the perceptions of self and not-self for the fourth, in other words, the self that will be doing the path benefiting from it. And not-self is a perception you apply to anything that would pull you off the path. And then finally, for the third noble truth when you finally arrive at the end of suffering, you have to let go of all perceptions and that includes perceptions of self and not-self.

24:57

So if the Buddha pinned down an answer the question of is there a self or is there not a self, he wouldn't have been able to use this strategy in this way. So this is why that particular question gets in the way of our goal here, which is to put an end to clinging. Now these strategies of self and not self, actually, these are things that we're doing all the time already. Wherever you define a sense of self, there's going to be a sense of not-self outside of the boundary, it's just that we tend to be pretty erratic and how we do this. So if you could take a picture of your sense of self, as you go through the day, it would be like reflections skittering across water, or an amoeba moving here and moving there taking different shapes. Sometimes you have the shape of a human being sometimes an animal, sometimes just a shapeless blob. But your sense of self keeps changing, we have many different selves. This is an important point to realize, we're not just trying to get rid of one self here; we're trying to look at all our different strategies for happiness because that's what self is, it's a strategy.

26:15

Trying to figure out what is worth holding on to, what you have control over, so that you can find happiness. And so depending on the desire that you have, you will be identifying with different things and dropping other things. In other words, you'll be selfing some things and not selfing other things. Think about when you were a child, suppose you have a baby sister, the kids down the street are going to beat her up. So you go down and you save her, you protect her, because after all, she is your sister. You come home, and she takes one of your toys and starts playing with it and won't give it back. But in this case, she's not your sister anymore. She's the enemy. And this is the sort of thing we do all the time, defining ourselves in different ways, depending on what we want. What the Buddha's having us do here as part of the path is say, okay, focus on one thing really sincerely, which is the end of suffering, and learn how to be more systematic in how you choose to identify yourself and dis-identify yourself, so that you can actually attain that goal. So again, the focus here is not so much on what you are, but it's what kind of identity you take on which ones are worth it and which ones are not, again, by your judgement. When is it worthwhile to identify yourself with your body? Okay, when you realize that you're going to need this body to practice; you're going to need this body in order to live a healthy life. Okay, you look after it; is your body because it is your responsibility. Other times you put the body aside, you focus more on your mental qualities. And there are times when you say, the body's not me, I've got to take care of the state of my mind instead. So again, this is a process we've been doing all the time; selfing and not-selfing. And the Buddha simply asking us to be more systematic about it so we can attain a really consistent and worthwhile goal.



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28:17

Now one of the issues that comes up with people when I bring up this issue of how the Buddha never said there is no self. There was that phrase where the Buddha said to Ananda: "Sabbe Dhammā Anattā; all phenomena are not-self." That's an important insight in the of course the practice, it's going to be one of the insights toward the end of the path. But some people say well, doesn't that mean that all dhammas, all phenomena are not-self? Doesn't that mean there is no self? Or look at it in terms of how the Buddha teaches right view in other places as well. There's an interesting passage where Anāthapiṇḍika, who was one of the Buddha's disciples, has been challenged by members of other sects saying, "What is this? What did your teacher teach? What views does he hold? Anāthapiṇḍika, who is a stream enterer at that point; he's already getting his first taste of awakening says, "You know, I really can't tell you what views the Buddha has." "Well, what about the monks? What are their views?" "I can't tell you their views either." "Well, how about you?" "I'll tell you my views, but first, you tell me yours." And so the wanderers go through the whole series of kind of the questionnaire of that time of the big issues: "Is the cosmos eternal, non eternal, finite, infinite? is a self the same thing as the body or is something different? When an awakened person dies does that person exist or not exist both or either? And in each case, Anāthapiṇḍika says when you hold on to a view like that you're holding on to stress and you haven't gained an escape from it. And so they asked him, "Well, what is your view?" And he says, "Whatever has been brought into being is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress, whatever stress is not me, is not what I am, is not myself." And they said, "Well, in that case, you're you're clinging to that." And he says, "No, through this view I've seen the escape from it." After all, he said, "Whatever is fabricated, put together, the view itself is fabricated, put together. The view itself, ultimately would turn around and look at itself, to see that it too is something that you should let go. So the view contains the seeds of its own transcendence. And it's the same with Sabbe Dhammā Anattā; all phenomena are not-self. First you use that, you arrive at the end of the path, you have your first taste of the Deathless, most people will latch on to that. Which is why they don't get full awakening right away, and they just get stuck at a lower level of awakening. And so you have to realize, okay, even though this seems to be unfabricated, this too has to be like go of, it too is not-self. But then the phrase Sabbe Dhammā Anattā; that, too, is a kind of dharma, that's actually fabricated, it too has to be let go. So the way that is phrased, is not meant to lead to the conclusion that there is no self because the Buddha again and again, and again says "To say there is no self to say there is a self- this is going to give you a wrong view, it's gonna get you entangled, you use this particular insight first to let go of your attachments to other things, and then you turn it around on itself. You can't do that with the view that there is no self, but you can do it with the phrase "all phenomena are not-self." What this means is that right view, when it's really right contains a message for it's own transcendence. It's like those notes that they give in the spy movies. After you've read this note, destroy it. And that way you let go of your final attachment. And this helps us understand what the Buddha has to say, and what you hear also among the Thai Forest Ajaans, which is that when you reach a really highest level of the practice, you have to let go not only of self and not self, you also have to let go of the idea what's true. It may be true that all phenomena are not-self, but you have to learn how to let go of that too. So when the Buddha says that when you fully awaken, you don't hold on to truths anymore. You've seen the truth; this basically connects with the fact that in the Pali canon, truth is divided in two ways. One, there is a fact. And then there are statements about facts, and so



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you're going to be letting go of all statements about facts if the mind is going to gain awakening. But you do have the fact of nibbāna, the ultimate happiness. So those are some of the points I wanted to make this morning that the Buddha did not answer the question of whether there is or is not a self. The teaching not-self is meant to have you look instead at how you create your sense of self. And realize it has its limitations. But within its limitations, there are certain ideas of self that are going to be useful. Others that are going to be totally useless, you want to like go of them from the very beginning. So you're going to be cultivating a skillful sense of self for part of the path and also learning how to get more skillful in your perceptions of self and not-self. Until you reach the point where you don't need either. Now to say that there is a self, or there is no self, or to define yourself as X, Y or Z, finite or infinite, connected, interconnected, individual, permanent, not permanent, that's going to get in the way this process of looking more directly at yourself as an action. So again, that's why the Buddha put that question aside. So those are my thoughts that I wanted to share with you this morning. We have time for Q & A.

Questioner 33:49

Thank you Ajaan. So my question is to do with the fourth tetrad of the ānāpānasati. The...so you train yourself to breathe out focusing on inconstancy. And how does the subsidiary that is a rough shorthand reference to the three perceptions? So how do you know when to apply that what's the appropriate time to apply the perception of inconstancy, stress and not-self in regard to the fourth tetrad of the ānāpānasati?

Ajaan Thanissaro 34:30

That's the topic for this afternoon. Can you wait? Okay, thank you

Questioner 34:43

So, I, about a year ago, I I feel like my meditation opened up quite a bit and and I was able to bring up like, piti and sukha at will basically with my breath. And it lasted for, you know, maybe like three or four months. And then since then I seem to be unable to bring it up almost at all in, in any way. Like it was. And I guess now I kind of get to a place of stillness. But I kind of, but it seems like there's, there's kind of a a dullness there as well, because my mind will subtly start to, to wander. And then I'll kind of catch myself. But I was wondering if you just had any advice for either being able to get back in touch with the piti and sukha? Or potentially what to do from from this still slash potentially slightly dull state that I'm getting to now.

Ajaan Thanissaro 36:09

Okay, you became a piti junky. So what you got to do when something like that comes, you have to say, Okay, well, how much is enough? How much do I actually need? And then learn how to figure out how do I go beyond this? So when you might want to back up and say, Okay, I'll just sit here and I will let myself breathe for a while. And then finally the breath comes in, it's gonna feel really good. Say, Okay, that's the pleasure I was looking for, where am I feeling it now? It might be that you have to now focus on different parts of the body than you did before. It's basically it's kind of a reset. See how that works.

Questioner 36:49

Thanks. Thank you very much.



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Questioner 36:56

Okay, thank you, Ajaan, for the talk. You had said during your talk that the view contains the seeds of fabrication? What do you mean, I didn't quite understand about the view.

Ajaan Thanissaro 37:12

The view itself is fabricated. It's something you put together and so when the view says, You've got to let go of all fabrications, okay, you let go of other fabrications first, and then you try to say, Oh, this view is fabricated, too. So I've got to let go of this. It contains the seeds of its own transcendence. That's when I said it's like, it's like those messages that say, you know, after you've read this message, destroy the message.

Questioner 37:42

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I'm trying to get to the point where I'm understanding my views behind the thoughts is that, is that right? Should I be trying to understand my views behind the thoughts?

Ajaan Thanissaro 38:02

Yes, yes. Ask yourself where does this come from? What assumptions am I making? That's a good, useful question. Because when you bring the assumptions up into the light of day, you realize this isn't something I really want to follow.

Questioner 38:16

Right? Right. And sometimes I have a feeling with that. And so it's easy to find where it's coming from, but sometimes I don't and so it's not so easy to read that. Okay, I have one more question. With the current of the currents that come out of the mind, is a person able to understand the current as it comes out of the mind before knowing nirvāna? Or have to wait towards....

Ajaan Thanissaro 38:57

No, no, you start observing that in your meditation it's almost like there's this physical feeling there's something going out, but you don't go with it.

Questioner 39:10

Okay, I'm, I can, like, I'm at the point where I can tell when the thoughts are blossoming. But that's it. Anyway, thank you.

Questioner 39:21

Yeah, thank you so much. I'm just trying to place some of these different views of identity. In actual life, you know, like on Facebook and things like that when you find all these different views, and some of them sound actually really good. Like I do a lot of Qigong practice, which I find really helps with my meditation, but it's a lot about expanding into the universe, drawing the universal qi down. Would that then be a theory of what you say here then identifying self with the universe?

Ajaan Thanissaro 40:09

You don't have to identify with it, you just say, look, I need to make this connection. After all, the qi in the universe and the qi in my body are basically the same kind of qi. So you don't have to



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identify "This is me- that I'm making identification with the universe; I'm connecting the energy channels in my body with everything that's out there." You can do that without defining yourself,

Questioner 40:33

Which I think is what I do. Yeah, that really helps to clarify that. Yeah, thank you.

Questioner 40:44

Thanks so much again, Ajaan Geoff. I have always been wondering why Buddha said, whatever is impermanent, is not-self. Why does self have to be permanent?

Ajaan Thanissaro 41:03

The question is, "Is it worth claiming it to be yourself? It's a value judgment. You can choose what you're going to identify with, do you want to choose to identify with something that's impermanent? And for the sake of the path, there will be some temporary things that you're going to identify with, which is what we're going to discuss in the afternoon. But ultimately, when you've reached the end of the path, you don't need to identify with anything anymore. At that point is not worth it.

Questioner 41:39

Okay, I do have a second question. When going about daily life, I notice a lot of pain and suffering actually come from, you know, our ego or me, this is me, they treat me this way or that way. And that's kind of like self, right? Identifying with myself? So I should just changed the way I talk to myself, Oh, look, you're identifying yourself with this identity or that identity and just let it go?

Ajaan Thanissaro 42:15

That's part of it. And also you can tell yourself, look, I don't have to make myself the target of their words. You got to be choosing what you want to identify with, and the you as the victim of other people's mistreatment, that's not usually a good thing to identify with.

Questioner 42:35

Yeah, that's a lot of things, not just other people treat me and how I behave, a lot of things is driven by that self. Yeah.

Ajaan Thanissaro 42:41

Yeah, well, again, try to see that there are many selves in there- it's not just one, and decide which one of the selves you want to identify with, and which ones are actually causing problems.

Questioner 42:52

Just choose the one that's skillful.

Ajaan Thanissaro 42:55

Right.

Questioner 43:03



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Thank you. I'm curious as to the ultimate purpose of trying to determine self or not self, within the context of one's own perceptions. As opposed I mean, in other philosophies it's how the self functions in the larger context of humanity or of existence, that's more important. So if someone dies, for example, in the legacy of that person, or the obituary or whatever, it's a consideration from the people who were in contact with that person who died, how that person was in life, if you know what I mean, how the function of that person, so in other words, to what degree I can see in like the previous question that was posed just now, how it's important not to allow others to determine our sense of self in a destructive way, so that it doesn't serve us or anyone else for that matter. So it's unskillful. But by the same token, I wonder to what degree this enquiry is really important. Or let's say maybe not important, but what do we actually ultimately determining here with this inquiry is is it isn't it more how, what what purpose we're serving in the community or in the world or in this or even in the context of a sangha for example?

Ajaan Thanissaro 44:43

Okay, well, you think about the Buddha his first priority was to gain awakening. And then he said, Okay, now what can I do with it so how can I be helpful? So for us again, the first the first priority is, how can we find freedom from suffering? and how you define yourself around that question, which selves are skillful, which ones are unskillful for that purpose, then part of that quest is going to be, part of that practice is learning to be more generous. Again, you're doing it, you're practicing generosity for the sake of your ultimate freedom. Now, once you've attained ultimate freedom, and then then everything you do can be a gift to everybody else. Again, like the Buddha he gained, finally gained awakening, that's when he was able to help the most people. So the first step, the first priority, though, is how do I identify myself? How do I learn to dis-identify, so that I can actually follow the path all the way to freedom? Once I've attained freedom, I'll be able to be free to give everything I can. But it's also not the case that as you're on the path, you're not also helping people. But that's a secondary goal. You're helping people for the sake of training your mind.

Questioner 46:01

It sounds like multitasking.

Ajaan Thanissaro 46:04

Well, it turns out, it's not that bad.

Questioner 46:08

I mean, it's it's great for the Buddha. I mean, and of course, that's, that's why we have this legacy 2500 years later. I mean, I totally get that. But for those of us who are sort of stumbling along in this, on this path... I don't know there's something about that sounds, the idea that that it's a means to an end, that helping other people in the meantime until we're awakened sounds a bit...or it's countercultural in any event?

Ajaan Thanissaro 46:33

Yeah, of course it's counter-cultural, look at our culture. It's crazy.

Questioner 46:39

Fair enough. All right. Well, to be continued, thank you.



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Questioner 46:47

Thank you, Ajaan, for being here. I was hoping I could validate a premise for my question first, before the question itself. Anyway, is it correct that right view is the statement that all phenomena are not-self? Is there more to it that I should be thinking of?

Ajaan Thanissaro 47:08

Right view is the Four Noble Truths.

Questioner 47:12

Okay, and how does that statement relate to the Four Noble Truths?

Ajaan Thanissaro 47:16

Okay, with the Four Noble Truths, each each of the truth has a duty. okay. The duty with regard to the first truth of suffering is to comprehend it. The duty with reference to the second is to abandon it. The duty with regard to the third is to realize it, and the duty with regard to the fourth is to develop it. So in order to comprehend suffering and to abandon its cause the Buddha gives us a pattern of reflections. First, you want to watch this thing arise and when it's arising what's causing it. That can lead, then you want to watch it's passing away. Third, you want to look at the allure What is it about these clinging aggregates that you really like? Yeah. What is that craving that you really like? Then fourth, you want to look at the drawbacks. Yes. And this is where the three perceptions come in.

Questioner 48:02

I put the three characteristics first accidentally, didn't I? Yeah. Thank you. That was helpful. So thank you. So the statement you made around all phenomena are not-self containing the seed of its own transcendence. When I carry my concentration practice away from formal like sitting meditation or walking meditation, I can kind of perceive that amoeba as I go through daily life where I'm selfing and not-selfing. And I can sense the practical utility, excuse me, utility of that statement containing the seed of its own transcendence. So I find myself curious, what statement if any, contains the seed of transcendence for getting away from statements of truth?

Ajaan Thanissaro 48:48

Okay, well, that one is one of them.

Questioner 48:50

Okay, okay. So you don't let that go. You just hold on to it until the end? Yeah. Okay?

Ajaan Thanissaro 48:56

Again, that's when you said that all all truths have to be transcended. Okay. Ultimately, you're gonna turn around look at this truth too.

Questioner 49:03

that, I think was the phrasing I was looking for. Thank you. Yeah.

Questioner 49:12



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Tan Ajaan, I have a question again, regarding at the moment of death, what are skillful strategies that we can use from the perspective of self/not-self? Like, for example, letting go of the body because thinking it's not-self? That's my question.

Ajaan Thanissaro 49:32

Okay, well, you have to decide how far you feel ready to go on this. I mean, ideally, you should be able to drop your identification with everything. And there are people who gain awakening at the moment of death. However, if your mind doesn't have the strength, say, "Okay, I want to hold on to the idea if I have to come back. I want to come back to a place where I can practice."

Questioner 50:00

Yeah. Thank you.

Questioner 50:07

So Earlier you said that the teaching of not-self is neither eternalism nor annihilationism, in Uddana 8.2 There was this sentence for those who see and know, there is nothing. It sounds quite blunt. And it sounds like annihilationism Could you please explain that?

Ajaan Thanissaro 50:33

The nothing there is nothing worth clinging to.

Questioner 50:37

Oh, so no object for papañca is that what it means?

Ajaan Thanissaro 50:41

Papañca or clinging or craving or anything, yeah.

Questioner 50:44

I see. So that sentence describes the state of nibbāna. Right. Right. And in nibbāna, there is still the consciousness without surface. Right. Okay. Thank you very much.

Questioner 51:02

Hello Tan Ajaan, thank you very much for the talk. Yeah, I'm getting the message that questions of ontology are irrelevant for this journey. What confuses me about that, I can, I can probably work with that, but what confuses me is that there seem to be other questions about ontology in the scriptures, in relation to other realms, and beings, such as Devas, that's something that I've really struggled to square with.

Ajaan Thanissaro 51:39

The Buddha's not saying that all questions of ontology should be thrown out. Afterall, he does say that nirvāna exists. That's a big ontology right there. But the question of what you are, that's defined by your defilements, and as long as you keep defining yourself by your defilements, you're going to be preventing yourself from gaining awakening. So that's a particular ontology question that you put aside.

Questioner 52:10



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Thank you. Good evening. bhante, thank you for teaching us we are ever so grateful Thanissaro Bikkhu. My understanding from your morning, or this morning's talk is about... is this correct: hold on to a sense of self until we are ready to like use it skillfully, in order to reach nibbāna. And once you reach nibbāna, or have crossed the path, then you can put aside the raft. And there is no self at that point in time because you've already reached the father shore. So use skillful discernment.

Ajaan Thanissaro 52:54

You use your discernment. Again, think of yourself, not just one self, but there are many selves. And you have to figure out which which of your selves are going to be useful for the path, which ones you have to let go of. So it's not like you just hold on to your idea of you. But you have to question, Okay, what is worth holding on to in me, what is worth identifying. And when you get the other side, then you put it all perceptions aside. This is where there's a passage where Ajaan Mahabua was asked whether nibbāna was self or not-self. And he says nibbāna is nibbāna. Self and not-self don't apply at that point at all.

Questioner 53:31

So bhante, are we using this self like to get rid of all the unwholesome states in our minds that arise basically, right? Because, and in the living present moment, as they arise, stay and pass away and see anattā in everything, and then once we reach that in a meditative state, skillfully and reach the stages towards the enlightenment, right. And once we reach nibbana dhatu, the self completely, there is absolutely no self at that point.

Ajaan Thanissaro 54:05

The Buddha wouldn't say there is no self, it's simply that you don't use the concept at that point. Yeah, exactly. Yeah, that perception is gone.

Questioner 54:13

Yeah. So conventional truth and nonconventional truth...

Ajaan Thanissaro 54:15

Getting there, you're going to be letting go more and more and more, you stop identifying with the aggregates. Yes. And that's the result of stream entry. But even after stream entry, there's still is sort of vague sense of I am that lasts through until arhantship

Questioner 54:32

Yes. Yes.

Ajaan Thanissaro 54:33

Once you hit arhantship then that's gone. The question is which of your many Gitas are...

Questioner 54:44

Let go of all of them Bhante, it's just a bunch of suffering.

Ajaan Thanissaro 54:49



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No, you can't you can't just throw them out. You have to sort through them which ones are worth keeping and which ones are not.

Questioner 54:55

Yes, absolutely. Keep a hold on to the wholesome until we've fully developed it. Thank you bhante. May you live a long and healthy life and teach us lots of dharma. Thank you, bhante.

Questioner 55:11

I have a question that's different. And what brought it up was when you were talking about view, and for me was holding to views and identifying with views, but this is somewhat different, it's just about starting to lose your mind, which I have, and this might not be the proper time. And so, you know, part of I see as my identity is thinking, feeling. But when sometimes this happened, I would read something like multiple times, and not remember anything in it, there was no clinging in the mind to what I was reading. And so there is a sense of sense of self that's not there, to be identified with, which is sort of okay. But I don't, it's sort of like it was hard sometimes to practice, because you're forgetting a lot of what you know, to practice. And that's sort of okay, because I did notice Moments of Awareness, even though I wasn't quite aware of what I was aware of, if that makes any sense. But I knew that there was something and, and that happened a lot. So I guess when I'm thinking about, so and not-self, I'm also thinking about, you know, if we lose a function like mind, or seeing, but seeing's different, because it's a sense, or the mind, which is what I know, is a lot of my practice as well as the body. I'm not really articulating well, but I'm wondering, what do we do when we start going, and in losing our mind, how to continue to practice or what is self and not self?

Ajaan Thanissaro 57:25

This is where you have to work on as much mindfulness as possible. But as I said, we'll be talking about this skillful use of self this afternoon. And so you want to keep remembering, reminding yourself again, what are the important things I need to know? And just keep working at trying to remember that what are the important things I need to know I need to know what the state of my mind right now, I need to know when my mind is going off into something unskillful, how to stop it.

Questioner 57:57

Okay, but when the mind is not there,

Ajaan Thanissaro 57:59

okay, let's just say okay, I'll wait until it comes back.

Questioner 58:04

But what if it sometimes it doesn't? Well, I don't know what happens on the other side of what I'm talking about. It's a totally different world. So it's a way of clinging to what I know versus what could be beyond that.

Ajaan Thanissaro 58:19

For the time being, I'd say, hold on to what, you know, whatever good things that you know, hold on to those.



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Questioner 58:25

Okay, and should I keep it simple? Like, Excuse me, could you repeat?

Ajaan Thanissaro 58:31

Keep it simple. Give yourself some very simple instructions.

Questioner 58:35

Okay, that's just what I've been doing. Thank you.

Moderator 58:41

Let me get to some of the questions here. Okay. And hopefully I get this right. Because some people are not putting things in terms of questions. In the Alagadupamma Sutta, the Buddha's speaks of the men who grieve over the loss of his atta as grieving that something which does not exist internally. Could this be a determinate that the Self does not exist?

Ajaan Thanissaro 59:06

No, because again, when the Buddha said you take his teachings, there are two types of teachings, that the teachings where you take the teaching, just for what it says, try not to work out the implications. And the second one is where you try to work out the implications. Now he says if you try to work out the implications that there is no self you're taking his teaching in a place where he wouldn't take it. Because he says again, and again, do not work out that particular implication.

Ajaan Thanissaro 59:43

Okay, there's the essay or the short book called the mirror of insight, and I've written about this there, about the two types of teachings that the Buddha gave whether we should take, draw out the implications or just leave them as they are.

Moderator 1:00:01

Next question is: Dear Ajaan, Do we delight in the process of I-making, in my making? Or do we delight in the world that we build around that? Or my, what do we cling to here?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:00:12

You can delight in the I-making you can delight in the world; there's lots of things you can delight in. You've got to be careful about where you take your delight.

Moderator 1:00:21

Another question: in Majjhima 25, Nivappa Sutta, views about the self being the body etc. The undeclared questions are said to be Māra's doing, hurdles that he has fabricated to prevent meditators from escaping his grasp and influence are subtle I-am conceits and fabrications of identification anattā in the sense of the body, that they are one of Mara's tools or strategies to keep one bound to rebirth.

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:00:58



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Okay, the question is, how are you going to use them? There are ways to use yourself in order to make yourself bound to rebirth, but you can also use your sense of self to motivate yourself to practice. This is why you have to be very careful about which sense of self you identify with. There is the self that would want to keep on coming back, coming back, coming back. And that's one sense of self. But you also have another sense of self that would like to be free. And that particular sense of self is useful. Remember that the Ananda talked to the nun about conceit, but eventually we're trying to get beyond conceit, probably use conceit to get there and they can see this, if other people can do this. They're human beings. I'm a human being why can't I do it too?

Moderator 1:01:44

There's one on independent co arising,

Moderator 1:01:48

Dear Ajaan, dependent co arising are these phenomena called co arising together, or they arise as a sickness in sequential steps. If they arise together, then when one removes one of the phenomena, all of them stop?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:02:07

The problem is that it's both it's both because it's both arising together at the same time passing the same time, and also arising together rising over time. This is why it's so complex, look at the book shape of suffering, and that has a very thorough discussion at that point.

Questioner 1:02:27

Yeah, this might be a little off topic. But you know, I, I've vacillated a lot on you know, how, how, you know, where I stand in the belief in rebirth. But there's a passage I don't recall it from, but it's talking about. It's a funny analogy. And Buddha says, you know, if there's a fire, and you put out the fire, if you ask, you know, where did it go? west, east, you know, that that would be nonsensical. So yeah, I suppose my my question is, what's the, if one, you know, like, because you described how, ultimately, like, you want to get to a place where you're not reliant on any sort of ontological certainty, it's more than just a causal certainty if you know, this, Well, like, you know, this is going to be skilful, this is going to be unskillful. So I guess I'm just wondering how I, how I should approach like, the uncertainty of rebirth, and like, how it should relate to just being committed and practiced.

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:04:28

Okay, well, it's good to take as a working hypothesis, you don't know for sure whether it's there or not. But ask yourself if I actually took this on as a hypothesis for a while, how would I did my life as opposed to how would my life if I didn't believe that my actions had long term consequences? And you realize that you tend to be more responsible with your actions and you have to be more careful about your actions. The image of the fire that you just mentioned, refers to an arhant, when there's someone who has no more, no more fuel for being reborn, as long as we still have craving and clinging, there's going to be fuel. So it is possible to talk about someone dying here and being reborn there. In fact, the Buddha uses a different image of fire for that. He says it's like a fire going from one house to another, and it basically clings to the wind as it goes. The same way you cling to your craving as you go. So you can focus on if



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craving is going to be the problem, maybe I'd better work on my cravings right here and now. Understand how not swept along by them. Next question, Carolyn, thank you.

Questioner 1:05:37

My question is about spiritual bypassing. And so when you suggested that you choose the self that, you know, that we have many selves, that is most skillful. I was concerned that if some of the less skillful selves, I don't know, if they're less skillful, let's say, we go back to Western psychology and look at family systems. And consider there is these frozen parts of ourselves that were frozen by trauma at age seven, or eight, or nine or two. And we, if we don't address those selves, they will keep coming up and being traumatized by every day living. And so my question is around, well, if we ignore those selves, then because they're not skillful, they have these belief systems, then we're not really taking care of them in a way that would be liberating.

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:06:52

Okay, in this case, you have to look at what would be a skillful approach to those cells. And skillful approach would be to create a space in your mind where you feel secure enough so that you sort of bring the selves up and say, Okay, what's the issue? Let's talk. But first, first, you have to create that space inside. And then when we say that you sort of let go of other selves, in some cases you can't just say, "Goodbye, we're gone." You've got to say, "Okay, let's talk things over first before you go." And sometimes, you know, the selves that are traumatized whatever, they may have something to offer and so you will need to listen.

Questioner 1:07:32

Right, exactly. That's where you learn. Right? That edge. Great. Thank you.

Questioner 1:07:45

Ajaan, my question is related to applying no self teaching to my daily life. And I'd like you to validate if I'm understanding it correctly, and if my thinking is comprehensive. So the way that I think about it, in applying the not-self teaching of the Buddha to my daily life, is along the idea of don't take things personally. So that's one, two, don't believe everything I think, and then three, let go of what I'm attached to whether that's my expectation, my thoughts of others, or my ideas of what I'm identifying with, is that correct? And is it comprehensive?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:08:37

Okay, well, it's not quite comprehensive, because there are some things you got to hold on to in the meantime. And you decide, okay, this, this, you know, this particular issue that I'm holding on to right now, is this going to be helpful? Is it not going to be helpful? And be selective in how you let go of things? Let's put it that way. Don't just drop all your expectations. So you know, you have some expectations for the path. And the Buddha had expectations on his path, right. He said, I'm going to find the end of suffering. And he held to that. So you hold on to the good things. And it's largely a question of discernment and learning how to let go of the unskillful ones like we said, just now sometimes you need to say goodbye. Other times, you have to say, No, we have to talk things over first. Before we part ways. So

Questioner 1:09:32



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So I hear what you're saying. And so the way that I apply this is, if I'm creating misery for myself or others, that's when I start questioning. Oh, should I believe what I'm thinking? Is this right? Yes. So I'm not letting go of all my Yeah. So I think I'm doing what you're saying. And I think what you're saying so, so have I missed anything other than what we've talked about?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:09:59

Well We're gonna be talking about this particular topic more this afternoon so, tune in. Okay, thank you. Then we can check in at the end of the talk. Okay, well we'll come back two o'clock my time. But yeah, two hours from now.