The Experience of No-Self

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 44:53

The subject for this evening's talk is self and no-self.

Any length of time of exposure, generally speaking, to these kinds of teachings in this kind of facility will as a rule bring a person to hearing about and exploring what is often referred to as no-self or non-self. The area and issue of self, its appearance, the "I" and the "my" in this world—this is what we purposefully bring into focus. We look at our relationship to the question: What am I? Who is this? What is it to be in and of this earth and existence?

It is also spoken of quite regularly that there are three features or aspects of life's experience which we need to address with as much care and awareness as we can bring to them. This comes from direct quotes in the old texts of the Buddha and has been passed down from one generation of spiritual practitioners in the Dharma tradition to the next.

The first of these three characteristics of existence is impermanence—the field of change, both at its larger level and in its moment-to-moment unfolding. We've spoken about this during these days here, where awareness of change serves as a very important means and vehicle in life for staying in touch with the unfoldment of existence. So much difficulty arises in life through the mind's inability to live with change: change arising from within, change in the features of existence, and change coming through our senses. This awareness of change is not presented as the ultimate truth of existence, not as any absolute whatsoever, but as the way we experience existence through the mind and through the senses. We become aware of the feature of change, and we are told it is well worth our while to concentrate on it, giving genuine attention to it as a duty, as a dharma in our day-to-day life, being very clear about it.

Another characteristic of existence and our experience of it is the aspect of suffering, both in its large and formidable forms—personal and at larger levels of life—and also in its various expressions of unsatisfactoriness, known as dukkha in the tradition. These two characteristics of change and unsatisfactoriness we can witness and know and experience in a wide variety of circumstances. To some degree, the very apparent feature of change, of impermanence, informs us and tells us of the unsatisfactoriness of things. It helps reveal to us time and time again how little real control we have over anything, inwardly or outwardly.

Sometimes, of course, the feature of change works for our benefit. There are times when something is continuing and our greatest wish in life is for it to end, to pass, and therefore there is a corresponding relief. One is grateful for change, for something to finish, for something to be over with. In other relationships to change, however, there is something very painful and extremely difficult to deal with.

That dynamic, that interaction, goes on.

As one looks in the field of change, inwardly and outwardly, there is something unsatisfactory about it. Nothing can be relied upon. Nothing can give real security. There is nothing we can truly stand upon in terms of states of mind, states of body, or states of the world—because it all changes. Even the continuity of life on earth has no assurance for any human being, and at a global level you and I are becoming more aware of all of that. Therefore a certain fragility faces existence. Why? Because of the field of change, the activities of coming and going, and all that we as the present living generation have to work with, face, and deal with.

But then we come to the third aspect, feature, or characteristic of existence, and that is what is called anatta. The first is impermanence, the second is unsatisfactoriness, and the third characteristic is anatta. Atta means self—it means "I" and "my," it means ego. And anatta means not-self, not-I, not-ego, no-I.

In spiritual practice, people often report, "I've never had such an experience of no-self, no-I. I don't know what's really meant by that. I can't relate any of my experiences to something I could describe as having no I, no self, no me, no my taking place." Others can clearly and distinctly recall such situations, either in the near or distant past.

In relationship to this experience, we first need to observe and notice attentively the normal conditions of consciousness, the normal viewpoint which we as people on the earth come to agree about. A normal mind, an everyday conventional viewpoint, says: I am sitting here, you are sitting there. Through that mutual acknowledgment and understanding of oneself in relationship to other selves, we have our existence. We have a sense and some knowledge of who we are—one self appearing in contact with another self. All of that is the world of self.

Then this characteristic mentioned in the teachings speaks to us of no-self, of not-self. At the immediate level upon hearing that, it seems irrational, illogical; it doesn't fit in with my everyday normal mind. But the experience of not-self or no-self can be known and experienced in many different ways, and thus at times we may not be clearly aware of what we mean by it.

Let me take two or three examples. In relationship to any particular object of meditation—during these days we've explored breathing meditation, body awareness meditation, and states of mind meditation—quite naturally and frequently enough, the thought and the deeply rooted idea of "I" arises in connection with that. "I am breathing in and out. I am putting my attention through the body. I am experiencing these emotions. I am observing my thoughts." All of that is quite appropriate in description.

But it can be, and for some there are periods and moments, when the "I" doesn't seem to have a relevance. It doesn't seem to be really what's happening. It's as though the "I" is really an appendix to the simple, still conventional truth of what is taking place.

And thus there can be that simple, pure awareness—undiluted, in fact, by the "I"—where breathing in and

out is just going on. There's a consciousness, of course, which apprehends it, and it's just consciousness in relationship to inhaling and exhaling. It's just an event. The potency of the "I," which says, "Well, I am breathing in and out, and this is my breath, and this is my body"—that strength and that potency and the idea of substance of "I" begins to drop and fade away.

And it's just sitting on this earth. There's just breathing in and breathing out which is going on—rather pure, rather undiluted—and the "I" itself doesn't seem to have any significance, any relationship to that. Thus the response is much more in impersonal terms than personal terms.

These may be short-lived experiences, but in the impersonal light they matter and give great support to spiritual awareness, because they begin effectively to question the substance of "I." The no-self awareness, the no-self experience—or the non-self awareness and experience—acts as bringing a certain light to life, to existence, to the immediate existence. It just questions—one may not be realizing it consciously—but just questions the authenticity of "I," the substance of it, the reality of it, whether it really has an ultimately true existence.

But as I say, it's not the only expression in life of not-self or no-self. There can be, in our experience, this dropping and fading away of "I," and in its dropping and fading away, there's the sense of just life unfolding itself. There's just the process of things which is going on.

And one looks in quiet reflection, in the immediacy of experience, and one might just see the aging process as an example—just going on moment to moment, moment to moment. No "I" on the earth, no matter how much will or effort, can stop that process which is going on. One is quite clear about it, and the clarity about it reveals unequivocally the non-I-ness of the process. It just goes on as it goes on as it goes on.

Awareness, in this case, sees that going on, and we can't arrest it. We can't live in eternity. We can't have an endless continuity of existence. Why? It's no-self. It's non-self. It's the process of life unfolding itself. And when that's clear to us, inwardly, and with some depth to it, we say, "Ah, this is what no-self experience is, what non-self awareness is."

As I say, it helps to sober up the truth of life, the everyday conventional truth of life. It helps to make our experience of life stand out much more clearly, because we are beginning to understand and know what not-self or no-self is.

Just as that can be applied to body in the long-term view, but also in the momentary view, it applies equally to our thoughts and our feelings and our emotions. The experience and the revelation of them doesn't always carry "I" and "my" with it. Thus we can speak from direct experience and say, "Here is a stream of thoughts just going on. They seem to have a kind of drift or life or momentum of their own." There's no owner, no self that owns these thoughts. There is just that witnessing which sees thought as thought as thought—arising and passing in the consciousness. That is just going on, and it's awareness

which shows it.

But of course, in such experiences, either during or immediately afterwards, the "I" can arise, as it easily does, and says, "Oh, I have had a no-I experience." And it can produce a kind of conflicting or paradoxical relationship to that.

Whether it's seeing thoughts as thought but no owner, no real thinker; seeing and witnessing impersonally, with that intimacy that's necessary, feelings as feelings, waves as waves, emotions as emotions, bodily life as bodily life—in the experience of all of that, which is just life revealing itself in that impersonal light I referred to—when experiences like that do register very well and very clearly for us, it's quite natural and organic that in response to that, the "I" will arise and say, "I had this experience."

The "I," in connection to immediate memory or in the actual event taking place, the "I" as the deeply rooted sense, an idea that we have, does surface. It does present itself. It does draw that conclusion. And so one can find oneself, as I mentioned, in a kind of paradoxical or difficult situation.

Because it seems like one thing—no self, life just unfolding, body is body, feelings are feelings, perceptions are perceptions, thoughts are thoughts, emotions are emotions, states of mind are states of mind—they're just unfolding themselves, sometimes with "I" as it were embedded in it, sometimes not, just taking place. But a dilemma can arise because, as I say, either at the time or afterwards, it seems like the experience of "I" in life is giving confirmation to no "I."

One can find oneself, as some practitioners do, genuinely on the horns of a dilemma. Which is true? What do I accept? What do I believe? What's my normal state of mind, so to speak, or consciousness? Do I live and abide in a view of life that it's all no-self, non-self, and that's the ultimate truth of things, and I pin a great deal of faith in that? Or is my everyday experience of life very much in the conventional mode, where I keep confirming life through "I," through "I" and "my," and that's basically the reference point for existence—what is connected to, and sometimes stuck to, "I" and "my" existence? And therefore, whatever comes to "I" and "my," I take to be the reality, to be the truth, to be the way things are.

So in our awareness and in the seeing that takes place, as I said, the duality of life can have genuine and invaluable experiences of reality.

No self, non-self—whether arising through a specific perception, an unexpected experience, a developed experience, or the general process of life—all these and many other ways can keep revealing no self, no I, just events, just process. And yet, still the revelation of I and my arising happens. And there we are, our life going by, day in, day out, I and my rising, and no I and my showing itself.

And we ask: Is that it? Is that the truth of life? Is that the kind of final reality of our existence—a movement back and forth between experiences of no I, no me, no my, no self, and then back to I, me, my, and self, sometimes with a vengeance? This movement, this fluctuation between the two, seems to express our inner life and its unfoldment and its revelation.

Given all of that, it would be unwise, I would say, and unskillful, to highlight no self into something transpersonal. The Buddha never did it. The teachings needn't do it either. We might suddenly start saying, "Well, if I'm really going to live with the truth, then I would need to abide much more frequently in the no-I experience, because that's the real truth, because the I is a total lie, a total deception, a total fiction, and therefore totally untrue." But human experience has never supported that. Neither have the teachings of awakening, and certainly not the Buddha who, like other human beings, used with regularity the language of I in his teachings—fairly clear and self-evident.

So if in our experience of life we begin to elevate one no-I experience—spontaneously in meditation, when out in nature, when all the roles have dropped away, in a sudden perception that can take place, in the very descriptions that we speak about life just going on—it's all no-I language that's being used. You and I use it regularly. The poets have used it frequently. It's a common appreciation and realization. And then the I arises and appears and shows itself.

Here is the significant factor. It's not so much the presentation of I or its non-presentation in the ways that I've been speaking about. The question is: with the I, is there suffering? With the I, is there suffering?

The I itself, in a way, is not I. In a way, it's not I. It's another manifestation of life, another presentation that comes. There's been a dwelling on the character of I, I, I—but in a way, it's not I. This very I itself is an I which is shared with all humanity. That sense of I that I have when I sit here, that feeling of I, that quality, that notion, that deeply rooted idea or perception that I have, is the same I everywhere. The feeling of I, the notion of I, the experience of I, the quality of I, the language of I, the concept of I—this is something pervasive. In a way, it is not I, as much as the experiences of not I that arise occasionally, sometimes with some insight, some realization, some penetration into these things.

There's a kind of evenness of awareness, an evenness of seeing, which stops this distinguishing between I and my on one hand, and not I, not my on the other. There's a kind of sameness to it all.

What makes the difference, as I pointed out a few moments ago, is this: with the I and my, is there suffering in it? Is it locked, bound up with suffering? When it is bound up with suffering, our distinction as a supposedly separate self is the strongest distinction. When we're free from that I and there's spaciousness, expansiveness, warmth or love or contentment or equanimity or stability or calmness, and there's not a grasping upon that, there's a sense of interconnectedness which comes easily and naturally for us.

But when I am suffering, it brings—and is the one factor which brings—an extraordinary degree of substantiality and reification and hardness and emotion and fixation to I. Suffering does that more than anything else for the I.

So as we explore that and bring our awareness to all of it, looking into the nature of suffering, of dukkha, of unsatisfactoriness, it naturally makes less of I. Because the I can't get separate from that suffering. And

our capacity—inwardly, outwardly, together, with ourselves—then begins to help us change the conventions of perception, change the social norms and viewpoints that we have, and in fact begin to make a shift of consciousness.

There is a shift of consciousness which the teachings express again and again—a shift which is a final shift, a shift which is for once and for all. There is an end to the spiritual path, an end to spiritual practice, and therefore that shift brings everything to completion. The issues of I and no I have resolved themselves.

People in spiritual practice, in this duality of moving backwards and forwards, with all the exploration that it takes—looking at what is I, what is not I—can also get confused, understandably so, by language which I think is not helpful and not useful: the language of the higher self and the lower self, the language of the self with a capital T and a capital S, the language of a transcendental self or a pure soul.

Though that language can be used, it needs to be employed with extraordinary caution because of the confusion that can arise. The Buddha himself, and the healthiest aspects of the tradition, have never elevated self into some ultimate category. How easily in these fields the ego can confuse itself for all sorts of unsatisfactory motives and latch on to "I am the supreme self"—the conceit, the arrogance, the power tripping, the ego that can flourish when one is fastening or grasping onto the self with a capital T and a capital S.

So if we can, in our awareness of experiences of I and no I, of self and not self, keep it as much as possible within the relative fields of experience—both of which we know, both of which we comment on in various ways—without elevating no-self to an ultimate category, which Buddhists have done from time to time, or this elevation of the self into an ultimate category, which has also taken place, most noticeably in the Hindu tradition.

If you say there's this movement, self and no-self, going on side by side or simultaneously together, where is the consummation? Where is the end of all this exploration, all this endeavor, all this inquiry? What's going to bring it to a final, once-and-for-all completion in which there's no self-deception left, no falling back into the dualisms, the backwards and forwards between self and no-self, between me and this, that, and the other? What is that shift which is spoken of with such assurance through the sages for generations—that which, as I say, has a finality to it, and the experience of life confirms that finality?

A number of you in this hall have had tremendous exposure to spiritual teachings and practices here and elsewhere, in fact worldwide. It can be rather easy, understandably so, to be almost constantly and consistently working on the relative. Working on the relative is to work on the state of mind. To work on the relative is to work on the I and the not I. Working on the relative is to work on the relationship to bodily experiences and all those processes I referred to earlier.

And it might need—and it can be scary and generate some doubt and difficulty—to really lose interest,

and I mean lose interest, in working so much, so long, and so hard on states of mind and states of body. Somewhere in all of that working upon all of that, one has to say to oneself: enough is enough is enough is enough. Whatever the forms and strategies one has employed for that working on mind—remember, including emotions and every form of inner human experience—to be able to say to oneself, and this is no easy undertaking for a thoughtful and caring human being, enough.

And of course that can generate some restlessness. But what if I stop all of that? If I stop that, then what? Perhaps the attention needs to make a shift from the known and the familiar, which is heart, mind, and body, to that which is unknown and which is not of any of that.

It's as though we need for this a different type of concentration—the Buddha has referred to this, I may add—a different type of concentration, a concentration of that which is not mind and body. And the language for that, if one likes and uses language, needs to have a feeling response to, and is in fact ultimate in its feature, for those who have the language for that.

That language may be truth. That language may be ultimate dharma. That language may be liberation. That language may be enlightenment. That language may be God. That language may be realization. That language may be emptiness, which makes everything possible.

So one is actively forgetting, purposefully and quite deliberately, the incidental and irrelevant events that go on in the name of heart, mind, and body, and puts the concentration, so to speak, elsewhere—quite off that and quite onto that which is ultimate.

For some people, that shift of concentration, of attention, from relative matters—heart, mind, body, being in the world—to the focus and concentration and attention upon that which is ultimate, which is the fulfillment and the shift that matters, some feel, understandably and appropriately, no wish to bring a language to it, no wish to use a word.

The Buddha himself has been extremely and unusually cautious about using a word. Sometimes he'll say nirvana, sometimes he'll say liberation, sometimes he'll say the truth which never changes, sometimes he'll say enlightenment. Never fixing a particular word and keeping and identifying with it strictly again and again. Using language, I think, remarkably skillfully, so that we don't get a fixation about some word.

What is that to concentrate on which is not heart, mind, body, and the things going on around us? It requires a special kind of sense. So if one takes as an example: freedom. True freedom, and the understanding and the realization of freedom which is nirvana, which is the truth, which is liberation, which is enlightenment, which is God. What is that freedom? What is this freedom? What is this liberation? What is this enlightenment?

And the events of mind and body are quite marginalized, quite peripheral, because one is exploring and finding out what it is to realize the ultimate truth—not to be shy nor afraid of actually bringing that final and fulfilling element of the spiritual quest to completion. And therefore I say it's a certain kind of

concentration, a certain kind of interest and focus. Why? Because we're willing to go from the known, which is oneself in the world, to that which is unknown.

But that which is unknown, in its shift, transforms everything about the way that one sees life. Everything, once and for all. And it's genuinely and authentically liberating.

But we may have to forget our self and our no-self. We may have to just put it aside. Those discoveries which can take place, which are immediacy for us, can of course happen quite spontaneously—not through any concentration, not through any special attention to words, not through losing interest in that duality of life of "am I or am I not," "what shall I do or shan't do," and all those dualities, the pleasant and the unpleasant that we were hearing about in the inquiry this afternoon. The realizations, of course, can occur which are liberating and have a steadiness to them.

Therefore, in that steadiness, it's the one valid means, the one instrument that a human being has to know if they've realized something. If they've realized something, it's real. If it's real, it stays steady. If it stays steady, it's not going to be lost by the events of the world. And if one hasn't had realization but has had invaluable and important experiences in the spiritual life which come and go, it's not a realization. Realization makes real, makes steady, makes present—not affected by the dance that goes on around us. And sometimes we do get confused between what we've realized and what we've experienced.

Here we're interested in experiencing and staying steady with the truth of things. The truth of things has got nothing to do with impermanence, nothing to do with unsatisfactoriness, and nothing to do with no-self. That's just the conventional way that you and I apprehend existence and function in it. But what is the truth of things? That which stays steady, not subject to coming and going, not subject to unsatisfactoriness, and not subject to the presence and absence of self. What is the truth?

As I say, that can be apprehended, realized, through spontaneity. And for some, that spontaneity comes in various ways. It can also be realized through the processes which we engage in the spiritual life—in the commitment to spiritual practice, the urgency and the love of the quest for what is the truth. Not something to cling to, to make an ideology of and completely misunderstand the truth of things. What is the truth of things?

And that contemplative indwelling is something which I would say often gets forgotten and neglected. What is liberation here and now? What is that which stays steady in spite of the movement of birth and death? And if we can allow ourselves to dwell and contemplate and reflect and abide in these things, perhaps that will be a contribution to that realization.

Otherwise we get caught on those common horns of dilemma which I hear frequently in and out of retreats, where sometimes one will speak in ways of just being. Nothing to do, nothing to gain, nothing to benefit from, nothing to pursue, nothing to run after. Just being. And it's an important and invaluable aspect of spiritual teachings.

And one will also hear from voices like mine and others: just being—that isn't enough. Just having a depth of calmness and stability and just being present and being with life in a personal or impersonal way—that isn't enough. And that does generate the sense, of course, of something more. And so one can go back: well, if I'm just being there, then perhaps it can come spontaneously, and that approach is valid and useful and significant. And if it's just being, then perhaps I need to do something more to accelerate, to bring something about—that shift which has its own finality to it. And there are experiences and movements where we can go back and forth between these approaches.

More important than the question of being and the question of doing is: what is the truth of things? What is this liberation which is spoken about and has been and will be spoken about from one generation to the next? What is this freedom?

And as I said, one of the features of that realization is, in terms of heart, mind, and body, it takes so much—and in some cases all—of the suffering that's tied up with the inner life. It takes it out. Because the inner life is freed up from it.

And all these things are what we speak about when we speak of finding God, living with God, being with God, knowing God, dwelling with God—if that language is comfortable for us. And it's nothing theoretical or abstract or distant or whatever. A person knows what that means. And for someone who says the word God—G-O-D—"I can't relate to it, it means nothing to me"—fine, fine. One doesn't ever have to introduce the word God. There is another word: what liberation is, what freedom is. And for some, not that word also. All can fade away from consciousness.

So let's be as clear as we humanly can with our relative experiences of life, which I've been referring to—their place in life, their usefulness in life—and that which is truly, truly.

And then we pay the greatest respect to life, to the truth of things, to the nature of things, and to what it is to be.

May all beings live with awareness and insight.
May all beings see deeply into the nature of things.
May all beings taste daily liberation.

Thank you for listening.

To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.