In Search For Self And No-Self

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 52:33

What I'd like to speak about this evening is the search for self and the search for no-self.

The self is clearly a very central figure in our lives. It's the axis around which revolves our stories and our dramas, our histories and our searches. The self is the link of continuity through which we weave together our past, our present, and our future. It is a central figure in our joys and in our sorrows, our successes and our failures, our hopes and our disappointments. It is clearly an enduring companion in our lives.

It seems that there is no experience that is complete without the self to make it happen or to have it happen to. At times we feel good about ourselves. At times we feel bad about ourselves. Rarely do we feel indifferent about ourselves. The self is like the monster under our bed, like the dragon in our closet. Even in those moments when we are not so conscious of it, it seems that it is lurking somewhere, waiting to pounce. It is clearly something of enduring interest. There's almost nothing more interesting to us in our lives than ourselves.

What I'd like to do this evening, firstly, is to reflect a little bit upon the history of the self. What we understand about it, how it has evolved, and what role the self actually plays in our lives in this moment. Is it a help to us? Is it a hindrance? Is the self a friend or an enemy? Is it real at all? Or are we simply shadow boxing with a shadow partner, engaged in an endless dance with an insubstantial shadow?

The spiritual journey is, one might say, a journey to discover who we are, if we use that in a very cosmic context. There are entire spiritual practices devoted to this one single question—to sit hour after hour, day after day, month after month, and year after year with this one single question: Who am I? That question is an endeavor to discover what is actually true and genuine, a quest to discover what is authentic, and also a quest to discover what is false, what is just conditioned and constructed and built.

The search in the spiritual life to discover who we are really mirrors much of the searches and choices that go on elsewhere in our lives. In a way, we might say that our lives are a map of our search for definition. Our lives are a kind of record of searching for self, searching for an identity that we feel in harmony with, that we feel is authentic. This search is very compelling for us because we equate certainty about our identities with happiness and security. To have certainty around who we are seems to provide us with inner authority. And we all know in our lives that to be deprived of inner authority, we end up essentially at the mercy of other people's authorities. If we don't have inner authority, we seem to become a casualty, at the mercy of other people's selves that are stronger than our own. We end up at the mercy of other people's expectations, standards, values, and demands. In one way it seems almost necessary to have a self in order to survive in a world of selves.

We can trace this search for self and identity really back to our earliest memories. No child is born as a kind of blank slate—I think I can say that with some certainty. From the perspective of parents, it seems that children are born with a kind of budding self. A little self. Sometimes a very loud self, but a little self that clearly and loudly expresses preferences, likes and dislikes, patterns and tendencies. From a parent's point of view, parents often feel that they really don't have much choice about the miniature self that has been introduced into their lives.

I know from a parent's point of view, to be in the face or in the company of a child who is going through some grand dramatic tantrum—parents often look at each other in bewilderment and say, "Where did it come from? It's not me. It's not mine. It didn't come from me." And yet it's there. One encounters parents who are dedicated to nonviolence, who bid farewell to their children as they enter military training camp. And one meets parents who are perhaps very ambitious and assertive in their world and cannot understand their child's fascination with Japanese tea ceremonies. There seems to be little choice about, in some ways, what happens.

Those parents, of course, are very ready to abdicate all responsibility when their junior selves depart from their standards of acceptability and desirability, just as they're equally ready to claim credit when their junior selves seem to be doing rather well.

From a child's point of view, I think they often feel just the same.

We don't seem to have much choice either. From a child's point of view, I think it is true that there is no child who is born with an unshakable sense of self. There is something there, but it is not an unshakable sense of self. From a child's point of view, I think it often feels like clay—that our childhood identities, how we feel about ourselves, are very much shaped and molded by the authorities that we meet in our lives.

Our parents, our friends, our teachers, our social standards, our peers—all have their own standards and their own values which we are exposed to, which are at times imposed upon us, which are at times thrust upon us. And all of these standards and values and expectations that we meet as children, and the feedback we receive, all play a part in forming our sense of self.

Now no matter how benevolent the authorities are that we meet in our lives when we are children, those authorities do still carry with them certain expectations and values about what is right and wrong, what is acceptable, what is unacceptable, what is worthy and what is unworthy. We meet those dualities early in our experience as human beings. Those polarizations that we meet also carry with them certain consequences and certain shadows. We learn what the path is to praise and to love and to acceptance. We learn as children what the path is to blame and to judgment and to rejection. And when we are faced with a certain inner uncertainty, when we are faced with our own craving for belonging and for acceptance, then we learn which path is essentially the smart path to follow. We learn which path seems to be the one that is going to reap the rewards that we want—the affirmation, the acceptance, the approval.

Conformity can be one of childhood's guidelines, and it can also become a habit of a lifetime. Becoming what other people would like us to be, or seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, or internalizing the standards and the values and the expectations of others and adopting them as our own—so that we have our own standards, they feel like our own, of right and wrong and good and bad and worthy and unworthy.

There is no value, of course, in blaming anyone for this whole process and this whole cycle. Even the most loving and the most benevolent of parents bequeath a legacy to their children of their own values and their own standards. I know my children probably really look forward to the day when they don't have to be around someone who asks them all the time to pay attention. I'm sure when they grow up they will never want to have another moment of attention.

To some degree our self-definition is something that we inherit. To some degree it's based upon our own experience. To some degree our sense of identity is imposed upon us.

As we grow in our lives and grow more conscious, our search for self-definition, our search for identity goes through some changes. We go through some changes. We find ourselves to some extent less vulnerable to the expectations and the feedback we receive from others. To some extent, we find ourselves perhaps less governed by the need always to find approval and avoid disapproval. To some extent we learn through our own experience what benefits us and what limits us. And in our growing awareness and growing wisdom, no longer are all of our choices and directions and aspirations linked to or dependent upon only what we think the rewards will be.

Then we enter into another cycle, I think, of the self. We begin to search for what we sometimes call the real self. Not the one we inherited, not the one that was imposed upon us, but the real self. A self that we feel in harmony with. A self that embodies in some way, in a deep way, what we value and what we honor and what we aspire to.

This field of exploration for the real self is actually pretty vast. There are a lot of opportunities around, different selves to be. Sometimes we cast our eyes around the world and we think of all these different selves that would be nice to be, or what we might like to be. We could be the executive self, or we could be the earth mother self, or we could be the fast lane swinging type self, or we could be the nature lover self and live in the wilderness. We could be the mother self or we could be the independent, autonomous self. There are a lot of different selves that offer themselves to us.

We also meet, I think, as we begin our search for the real self, the incredibly powerful expectations in our culture to be someone. This is a very important thing in our culture—to be someone, to be someone special, to make your mark upon the world, to distinguish yourself, to succeed, to have a successful self. Being someone is something that has enormous prestige. Sometimes also we call it fulfilling the potential of ourselves. Being someone in our culture is considered to be one of the most worthy goals to strive for—to look for a label, to look for a description, to look for credentials that prove or that are evidence

that we are special, that we have a special self, a successful self. We have made it in the world. We have made our mark, we will be remembered. People admire us and applaud us. We try to arrive in many ways at this very hallowed destination of being someone.

In our culture it's almost a sacred pursuit, looking for acclaim, looking for prestige. We know that in our culture there's little room for no-ones. To be nobody, to be no one in this culture? This means you blew it, basically. You got lost on the way.

You faltered. You fell by the wayside. You're invisible. You wasted your life. If you are no one, if you are not someone, you've wasted your whole life—this is often the unspoken judgment. When you go out in the world and meet that inevitable question, "What do you do?"—you know, "Who are you?"—these credential questions start probing to find out what the self is. If you said, "There's no one home," the response is not going to be very rewarding. In fact, to be no one in our culture is essentially equated with being invisible. People who are no one in our culture are kind of ignored, sensed to be unworthy of attention, invisible to others.

Now searching to be someone can actually become quite a mission in our lives. And on one level we might say, well, this is psychologically very healthy and a very necessary process—to wean ourselves away from the authority of others, to wean ourselves away from the expectations of others, to wean ourselves away from the dependency upon other people to know who we are. In a way, we might say it's a healthy and necessary process of learning about autonomy, learning about inner authority, exploring our own potential. And of course, in many ways this is absolutely true. We need to go through this process of searching and questioning and looking to understand who we are apart from other people's expectations and images and needs and demands. It is a necessary and healthy process in our lives.

But we do need to be cautious also in our admiration of this process, and also to appreciate, perhaps, the endlessness of this craving to be someone, and how it can lead us into so very many detours in our lives. Because we see the nature of the self, it seems, is that it is never content really to be in a supporting role. It wants to be a star. It wants to be special. It wants to be visible. And sometimes you might even think of the self as being an appetite, as being a kind of hunger—a craving: *I want. I must be someone.* An appetite that may possibly never be satisfied. I've never met anyone who's satisfied that appetite.

So how do we achieve? And the reason we need to be cautious in our search for self, or even in our search for what is authentic—we need to be very careful in questioning: How do we actually achieve being someone? What are the avenues that we follow in order to find what is the real self, or in order to find a self that feels authentic?

Well, the primary ways in which our sense of self grows and is affirmed is through appearance and through performance. These two standards are the ways in which we evaluate the self, and the ways in which the self—who we are—is evaluated by others in the world: by appearance and by performance.

Now, I think we need to appreciate the tyrannical nature of these addictions to these two things of appearance and performance. They are the ways in which self seeks to find acceptance and praise. Appearance is one way of finding a credible self—looking for the appearance that tells us that we have the right body, the right mind, the right personality that we can present to the world. Appearance is the first basis of judgment by which we judge ourselves or others. Appearance also becomes the means to rewards in our world, the means to finding praise and love and acceptance.

But look what we do in servitude to this tyrant of appearance. How much that servitude or that addiction to appearance and to rightness is simply another name for self-abuse. How much restlessness, agitation, and fear in our lives feeds upon this tyrant of appearance—the fear of being unacceptable and the desire to find the right appearance. When the mirror in our lives becomes an endless authority. When the bathroom scales become a way of evaluating our sense of self-worth on a day-to-day basis. When how we judge ourselves on the basis of our bodies becomes a way of rejecting ourselves.

Now performance in our culture is the other path for discovering an acceptable self. And the addiction to performance manifests also in our obsession with perfection—being perfect in our work, in our roles, in our identities. Being the perfect partner, the perfect employee, the perfect mother, the perfect meditator. Performance is the way we win the admiration of others, and sometimes we feel the need to win the admiration of others before we can accept ourselves. This preoccupation with performance also naturally means an addiction to doing, because there are so many tasks to complete and so many improvements to make and so many things to fix. And sometimes it seems we'll never ever get to that point where we'll arrive at the right self.

Somebody else always seems to have it. We look around and everybody else must be doing it right, or better, or have the right appearance, the right way of looking, the right way of doing something. Somebody else is always a better mother, a better meditator, a better worker, a better writer, a better speaker—whatever it may be. Somebody else always seems to have the self that we would like to have.

Or else the self that we work really hard for—that we truly labor to get, all that effort we put into constructing that right self. Those hours and months and years of modifying ourselves. And then the self that we get doesn't really look like the one we wanted, or the one we even seemed to be promised. Even when the rewards come, I sometimes feel that those rewards really do very little to heal the emptiness, or that sense of fear inwardly of never being right and never being good. The obsession with perfection is always a winning of halos, a working for halos. But trying to be good always has that companion of never feeling to be good enough.

Now we come to the spiritual path, we come to meditation. I think sometimes we feel quite relieved to hear about no-self—to hear, or even to encounter through our own experience, that we are not the mind and not the body. Phew. It's good news, isn't it? To hear that we cannot be defined by appearance, that we cannot be defined by any image, that we cannot be defined by any judgment, that we cannot be defined by

any description. Instead, we are even encouraged to truly turn away from this quest of looking for a special self or a real self or a unique self. The goalposts are moved in our cycle of self. Suddenly the goalposts are moved. We hear instead the message that to pursue self is actually to pursue conflict, struggle, and alienation.

But I think it's also true that when we hear about the possibility of no-self, sometimes we have mixed feelings about it. On one level, certainly it's a relief to lay down this burden of relentless seeking for self-improvement and perfection. But on another level, no-self doesn't really seem like that great an idea.

There is a valid feeling—and I think for many women too—that we put so much effort into discovering what is authentic, into reclaiming our sense of femininity, into respecting ourselves, into learning how to honor ourselves and the forms in our lives, that we may feel very reluctant to hear this encouragement to let go, to not define ourselves by anything.

It is very true that all of us live in a world of form. We have relationships, we have work, we have bodies, we have aspirations. All of these are forms in our lives, and they are vehicles for embodying and manifesting what we most deeply hold to be true, authentic, and valuable. We need to honor those forms. They are vehicles of communication. The forms in our lives are the ways in which we communicate who we are, what is possible, and what we trust to be authentic. They are important to honor.

But sometimes the reluctance around no-self comes from a different source. Because I think actually we can trust that freedom does not mean negating ourselves. It does not mean negating the forms in our lives. It does not mean negating all of those vehicles for communication.

I think our reluctance about no-self sometimes comes from other feelings, often fear. How will we define ourselves without the guidelines of appearance and performance? Sometimes this is a great anxiety. How will we know what to do in the world without a self to tell us, without a self to want or not want, or to make choices? I think sometimes we feel that no-self might mean that we're going to be glued to a zafu for the rest of our lives, staring at a wall or at our navel. This whole idea of being no one sometimes evokes our greatest fears of floundering, of being invisible and homeless.

The underlying message, I think, that at times you might interpret as hearing in spiritual teaching—and sometimes you might hear it, it's true, I have to confess—is that there's something shameful about having a self. This is not my teaching, but you might come across it. That there's something shameful about having a self. There are certainly spiritual paths which entirely, totally discourage you from discussing anything personal because it's immediately pointed out: "This is just the self. This is just the self"—as if that makes it any better.

It doesn't make it feel any better just because it's "just the self"—it feels just the same. It seems the self has feelings.

But when we hear about this kind of shamefulness about having a self, about the I—you know, the

dreaded I—sometimes we are almost tempted to swear allegiance to the anti-self organization. There seems to be some kind of imperative: I must get rid of the self. If I'm going to be spiritual, I have to get rid of this self. And there's that old Zen statement where they sit you on a cushion and say, "Die on the cushion." And of course I'd be happy to die on the cushion, but how? Tell me how.

So then sometimes we undertake a new cycle. The self sometimes goes through a new phase. From being bad news in one way, it becomes bad news in another way. It seems obvious in this world—one basic message here is the self can't win. That's a basic message. So we undertake this new quest to find no self.

Now, this quest to find no self, if it is based upon denial, if it is based upon fear, or if it is based upon rejection, has some inevitable and lethal side effects. When we try to focus upon getting rid of the self or disowning the self or transcending the self or negating the self or cutting through the self—all those things it's possible to try and do—often what happens is we make a very basic sacrifice of sensitivity and compassion and interconnectedness, because we undertake the quest for no self at times in a spirit of denial. And when there is denial rather than wisdom, when there is denial rather than understanding the body, mind, and spirit dynamics, then that denial extends itself in a very wide field. It becomes a denial of form, a denial of relationship, and a denial of nature.

I think we have seen this in the spiritual life—this incredible duality where we can be inhabiting and reaching for the heavens, reaching for all these wonderful spiritual attainments, while it's possible to live with total lack of integrity and impeccability in the world. It's possible to have fantastic spiritual credentials and be reaching for a wonderfully seemingly blessed spiritual life, and yet be so absorbed in that pursuit that we can exploit or deny the world around us at the same moment.

Now even when the quest for understanding ourselves is undertaken with wisdom, we must still be cautious. We must still have this element of inquiry.

In meditation, we do discover actually, on a very profound level, the transparency of self. This is what we do here. And we discover very quickly this transparency. When you sit and you're even just a little bit still, you see this endless parade, this endless arising and passing of thoughts and feelings and sensations and sounds. What happens through the stillness and through the calmness is that the glue that previously bound all of those things together into a sense of self, into a kind of puzzle picture, begins to come unstuck. The glue begins to come unstuck, and it becomes increasingly difficult to isolate anything which is actually enduring. It becomes increasingly difficult to isolate anything within that parade and passing show and to point to it and say, "This is what I am" or "This is who I am." The moment that we begin to look for it, it is already past.

We see the arising of objects—the thoughts, the feelings, the sensations. We see the arising of all of these different notions about ourselves: I am this, I am that, I was this, I will be that. I am, I have, I know, I listen, I see, I want, I don't want. With clear attentiveness and stillness, as that glue begins to become unstuck, many of those ideas don't seem quite so solid anymore. They don't seem quite so substantial

anymore. They begin to dissolve.

Actually, when we begin to look for something that we can say "I am," we are already looking at what has already gone by. It's like you look around to try and find yourself, and the only self that you can find is the one that is already gone. It is always looking behind. "I was," you know. I was that thought, and there's a new thought. I was that image, and now there is something new. It is hard to find anywhere any center to rest in, anything that is substantial.

Now this can become, of course, very interesting. It becomes incredibly interesting. But it's also interesting the way in which we can take no self so personally. We see this arising and passing of these different selves.

And we can see this kind of lack of solidity, this lack of transparency. But we can also take it very personally.

I'd like to read you a story. One day a rabbi, in a frenzy of religious passion, rushed in before the altar, fell to his knees, and started beating his breast crying, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." The cantor of the synagogue, impressed by this example of spiritual humility, joined the rabbi on his knees shouting, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." The caretaker was watching from the corner. He couldn't restrain himself either. He joined the other two on his knees, calling out, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." At which point the rabbi, nudging the cantor with his elbow, pointed at the custodian and said, "Look who thinks he's nobody."

Now of course this is very humorous, but we might find ourselves also in somewhat of a similar position. We might come and say in an interview, "I saw no self." Really? "I had a wonderful experience of emptiness." Really? Where is it that we feel we can possess these insights? We feel we want to possess these insights. These are the best of the insights, the cream of the crop, the fruit that we've harvested, and we would like them to be mine.

In some way, even in the midst of that transparency and that passing show, we can still be preoccupied in a very subtle way with self—defining ourselves anew by our ability to see transparency. Have you ever had that experience when you sit and you have a moment of stillness, and this little voice comes in and says, "Ah, look, I'm quiet. Oh look, I finally let go"? We long to possess the insights. What a wonderful new self—a spiritual self we have now. An enlightened self. A very wise self.

It is true that in seeing this passing show, there is a sense of a great deal of transparency, a perception of transparency. And in some way we would like to make it into an experience that makes me look better, that makes me have a better self. In some way the self arises and wants to make a possession.

Now in thinking of no self as an experience in any way, there is some greater understanding of emptiness which may be missing—the liberating emptiness, the liberating understanding. In some subtle way at times, awareness is appropriated by the self.

Part of the responsibility for all of this that goes on around the self—whether it's trying to get a better self, or all of this that goes on around trying to have no self or trying to get rid of self—can really be laid at the feet of the bad rap that is given to the self. It's given such a bad rap, as if there's really some solid entity that we have to uproot from our consciousness. Sometimes the "I" is regarded as being so monstrous: the source of anger, the source of confusion, the source of delusion, the source of separation, the source of alienation. The self is blamed with so many things. It has a terrible reputation.

But all of this naming and blaming of the self leads to preoccupation with the self, whether it's pursuing a real self or whether it is pursuing no self. And I feel all of this naming and blaming is actually crediting the self with a level of power and substantiality which it simply doesn't have.

Trying to get a real self, trying to get rid of the self—sometimes these are two different enactments of the same dance, and both can rather miss the point. Trying to get rid of the self, we have assumed or given it an exaggerated responsibility. Sometimes then we can become preoccupied again with having the right performance and the right appearance, having the right kind of experience, the right kind of insight. It's another way of validating the self.

Now in meditation there is only one way that the self survives in substantiality, that the self manages to maintain an identity, and that is by making an object out of meditation. This is how the self survives meditation. The object becomes our experience, even when the experience is no-self. We might say, "I have good meditations" or "I have bad meditations." "I have great meditations" or "I have terrible ones." All the time we are making an object out of meditation, something to evaluate, and we evaluate ourselves on the basis of that object. Through objectifying meditation, making it into an experience—something that happens to me or something that I make happen—we actually pursue and preserve separation. We rest within those three areas of saying, "I have," "I am," and "I know."

Freedom is not the cessation. Freedom is not just the understanding of no self. Freedom is actually the cessation of ignorance. When I use the word ignorance, I'm not trying to offend you. What is ignorance?

Ignorance is believing duality and separation to be reality. Ignorance is to believe separation to be truth—to believe that there is reality in the divisions between inner and outer, I and you, us and them, black and white, high and low, inferior and superior, spiritual and worldly. Ignorance is believing that one object lives apart and separate from all other objects, just as we believe that we live apart and separate from all other selves. Ignorance is believing in those divisions and dualities to be the truth of how things are.

That ignorance then becomes expressed in the obsession with appearance and performance, with name and form.

There is no one to blame for ignorance. There is no one who can be judged for ignorance, and judgments make no difference. Where is the beginning of ignorance? Does it make any difference to trace our family

trees and find which of our ancestors was the first one to start the cycle of self-hatred? It makes no difference. There is no one to blame for ignorance. But ignorance can be dissolved.

Believing duality and separation to be reality is like looking into a mirror clouded with steam and seeing ourselves all distorted, believing and mistaking what we see to be the truth of who we are. We can take steps to wipe the mirror clear. We take steps in meditation to cultivate attentiveness, to cultivate focus. We take those steps with grace and wisdom to bond, to find intimacy with this moment. But we don't want to spend our lives polishing mirrors. It would be much better to see what is true, to see what is not distorted.

We take steps in meditation to cultivate calmness and serenity and impeccability so that we know how to live our lives increasingly in a spirit of nobility, in respect of what is sacred. But we don't take these steps so that we are going to gradually find the perfect face. We take these steps so that we can learn to leave struggle, so that we can learn to leave behind us the appetite of wanting, so that we can learn that there does lie within us a place of profound peace, of profound contentment, of profound wisdom that we know how to rest within.

But if we really want to know who we are, then we have to inquire very deeply and seek that which we cannot make an object of. To seek that which we cannot make an object of. When what we cannot make an object of is discovered, then we discover what it actually means to be free.

Freedom emerges not through an experience, but through grace and stillness—through the awareness and stillness that dissolves the world of appearances. And in that dissolving, we don't necessarily see a perfect face. We might even see the face we wore before we were ever born.

There emerges out of grace and stillness a profound and unshakable understanding of what is unconditioned—a suchness that embraces all life, all form and all appearance, but that is limited to nothing. A suchness that embraces all things without limitation.

It is like looking into the sky filled with cloud formations. In one way we might be very admiring of all those formations and think how interesting they are. We might even look at the space between the cloud formations and observe the way the clouds are dissolving. We might even open our eyes to the vastness of the sky which is embracing all of those formations but is limited to none of them and dependent upon none of them. We might discover in that looking the vastness of awareness, the vastness of suchness, the vastness of being.

May all beings live with awareness. May all beings deepen in wisdom. May all beings be free.

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