Q&A on Noticing Non-Self and Selfing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 14:39

Good morning, everyone. Nice to see your bright faces this morning. Hope it feels bright inside. You look good.

We have a few questions this morning, so I'll go through a few and see how far we get.

Carol spoke about noticing moments of self-arising and also noticing when they're not. It seems like as soon as I note non-self—is this even how you would note it—a sense of self arises. Is it possible to notice non-self without evoking a sense of I noting this? If so, how?

I think this is an interesting instruction. I didn't hear Carol's talk and I hadn't heard her give that instruction before, but it's an interesting one. One of the key pointings, I'm sure, in her teaching and as the note indicates, is that there's not a fixed self anywhere in this system. But a sense of a self does come into being at times.

The sense of self arises. I think Sally talked about this in her talk on Bahia as I-ing and my-ing. So it's the activity—and we could even call it the activity of selfing—that takes place. There's never a self there, but we construct one again and again.

To notice when the self is arising in that formation is very helpful. And then to contrast it with how it feels when there's not a sense of self arising. I want to point out that even though we may not notice a sense of self arising, there could be a subtle sense that we're not seeing. It's usually easier to notice the movements of greed and aversion because there's a movement toward something, either to hold on or push it away. But the activity of delusion is not so easy to pick up. So even at times when it feels like, "Oh, I'm not seeing a sense of self coming," there could be a subtle sense of self that's not being seen.

But don't go looking for that. Because we don't know what we don't know. That's why delusion is so hard to actively investigate. We don't know what we don't know. The only time delusion becomes clear is when we see the truth of something that had previously not been seen. And we can't force that. It comes when it comes.

So let's say a relative lack of self is seen. It's clear there's movement of wanting or not wanting, liking, disliking, holding on, pushing away. Those are clear activities of self. When those calm momentarily, there can be a sense of some relief. In this moment, those movements of I and my are not apparent.

So it is really good to notice that. Why? Because we want to find our way back to that more and more often. And as we do, our experience of that place where the self is not so active gets clearer and deeper. So

as we settle in more and more to this experience of no obvious self, that deepens and then other layers of the self may be shown and then can drop away. So we get to more subtle experiences of the absence of self.

This is a really helpful thing to notice. So then the question arises, how might it be noted? Not-self or non-self is a fine note, if that works for you. I'm not able to interrogate the questioner at this point, and so I'm not sure why the noting necessarily brings up a sense of self, except that it could be a new experience.

As we move into this territory of not-self, it's new terrain for most of us. And so there can be a sense of excitement or thrill or a little bit of pride or an aha moment that can lead to a sense of self around that seeing. So that can happen and that's fine. If it's like that, just greater familiarity with the activity of noting the absence of selfing will lay that to rest.

When we first come upon something, it seems new, fresh, exciting. Once we get familiar with it, it's like, "Oh, there's that not-self again. So boring. Nothing exciting is happening." I mean, often when people get into calm, they go, "Nothing's happening. I want something to happen."

So this is similar. I want more selfing. No, not really. So if that's the source of the "I" arising with the noting, that will wear away in time. Don't worry about it.

Or it could be even the putting in of the word "self." Oh, "self" means "I." So then the "I" sort of wakes up. Are you talking about me? Wakes up again. So another note, maybe it's a little more verbally neutral, would be "empty."

We haven't really talked about this, but we will at some point talk about the sense of emptiness in dharma practice, because it's really very central. Ananda once came to the Buddha and said, "Venerable sir, you say 'empty is the world, empty is the world.' What do you mean by that?" And the Buddha said, "The world is empty because it is empty of a self or what belongs to a self." That is, it's empty of "I" and it's empty of "my."

So this word emptiness in the Buddhist discourses mostly points to this perception of the absence of a self. And this is something that hopefully will be happening for you all.

Let's talk for a moment about this term perception because it's an important term. Roxanne's going to talk about it more tonight. She'll unfold it more. In Western psychology, perception, as I understand it, often means the data of sense contact. Oh, there was a sound—that equals perception. Or there's a sight—that equals perception.

In the Buddhist language, the translations we use, perception means recognition of something. So if you hear that, the arising is just a sound. We call that contact. In the Buddha's language, that's contact. The perception is "hearing" or "finger snap." Both of those are recognition of the sound. That's a different level than contact. That's clear, right? The contact just happens by itself and the mind comes in and recognizes

it.

It's said that the proximate cause for mindfulness to arise is a strong perception. That just means you notice something in your experience. Based on a really strong and clear perception, mindfulness comes and says, "That's what just happened."

So the noting practice really reflects this. And one of the reasons the noting practice is so powerful is it's strengthening that factor of perception: in-breath, out-breath, hearing, sensing, thought. So moment after moment, the perceptions are being brought to the surface and named. That's what's going on.

This highlighting of clear perception is what brings mindfulness alive. Mindfulness is knowing what our experience is in the present moment, and it's perceiving in these terms: in, out, sensing, hearing, thinking, and so forth.

Anything within our experience can be perceived. That's the foundation for choiceless attention. Anything we experience can be perceived. The experience of absence of selfing can be perceived. And when it's perceived, which is a natural function of wisdom, as your wisdom is growing, you're going to perceive this from time to time, it can be noted.

So the main thing is noticing it. Absence of self right now, as far as I can tell. And then find a note that suits. Could be "not self," could be "empty," could be something else that you discover. "No I," could be something like that. Find a note that matches, but trust your perception. Trust your perception, and this can become an extension of mindfulness.

At other times, you notice selfing is active, clear, and that's usually experienced as some agitation, because there's wanting and not wanting, liking and disliking, holding on and pushing away. Recognize that and feel the agitation of it. The activity of selfing usually goes with agitation. The lack of selfing usually goes with a degree of calming.

Start to notice that correlation. As you become more familiar with this calming, it may be momentary at first. It doesn't have to last the entire meditation period—it can be just for a few moments, but you feel calm. Notice that. Observe that part of this experience is the absence of any strong expression of selfing.

This is a perception you want to encourage, because eventually this kind of calm approach to your experience can become the baseline of your practice. Things will still come along to disturb it, but the calm can become the foundation. Then we begin to discover what I would call the natural mind, or the natural state.

This language emerges from the Thai forest tradition. It's not so much found in the Mahasi Sayadaw instructions or teachings, but you hear it frequently in the Thai forest. We come to realize that if we're not stirring this stuff up, the mind has an intrinsic peace that's very natural. We recognize this quality and realize it's completely unforced. You don't have to do anything to construct that peace. When you stop

selfing—stop claiming "I" or "my"—the peace is there, and it settles more deeply.

This is an approach to looking at your experience that can really support relaxation and trust in that element of calm. When it shows up, notice the absence of selfing. Notice how that feels. Observe that you're learning to find your way back there more and more. This can become the baseline for your relationship to meditation, your relationship to others, your relationship to life, unfolding in a very natural way.

Let me share one final analogy, since we have a couple minutes remaining. Joseph used this frequently in the early years of his teaching—the analogy of an inverted ramp, or a U-shaped ramp. He said that at the beginning of practice, the mind is like a ball rolling up and down this ramp. Initially, we do a lot of work to get it up to the balance point at the top, where it's steady. But give it just one little push, and it goes sliding off one side or the other—into desire or aversion. It's very difficult to keep it steady at the top because the slightest push sends it tumbling.

As practice develops, this ramp levels out, and the mind can come to rest in the flat area in the middle. It will still move off a little with a push, but it's quite easy to bring it back. It's no longer an uphill struggle to return it to center.

Over time, that ramp inverts, with the U going down to the bottom. The mind more naturally rests at the bottom of that ramp. Things will still come along that push it up one side or the other, but it naturally wants to find its way back. Its karmic pattern becomes this returning to the resting point in the center.

We want to start observing this kind of development, and calm is really the doorway to begin seeing it. Notice the presence of calm, the absence of selfing. You can't force the duration of calm, but you'll observe that it begins to extend naturally. This is a sign of the meditation deepening in its own organic way.

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