Not-Self and Selfing

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 57:10

As we practice meditation, we begin to see our experience more directly. We've been talking a lot about this in the instructions, encouraging you to meet the elemental nature of our physical experience, just meet the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality of the experience. Meeting the emotions, thoughts, just as they arise without getting caught by the content of those experiences. So the meditation instructions encourage us to drop below the realm of concepts to meet our experience more directly.

We begin this exploration and start to get familiar with this more direct experience. That's part of the meditation instructions that we suggest: learn how to meet this experience more directly. In getting familiar with our experience, we get familiar with what we might call the specific characteristics of our experience. We get familiar with the pressure, the vibration, the tingling. We get familiar with all of the sensations.

The other part of the meditation instruction, another aspect of what we offer, is to not only pay attention to that level of experience—what is happening in that sense realm—but also to start noticing what happens to it when you pay attention to it. This part of the instruction begins to point us not to the specific characteristics, that wide variety of characteristics of experience, but to the more common characteristics of experience. By noticing how our experience changes, we begin to recognize that all of our experience is impermanent. And as Joseph talked about last week, not only is it impermanent, all of our experience is also unreliable as a place for lasting happiness.

Some of you may recognize these two—anicca, impermanence, and dukkha, unreliability—as being two of what are called the three general characteristics of all experience. The third being not-self, anatta. So tonight I'd like to talk about these three as characteristics and discuss how they interrelate. But primarily I'd like to talk about this third one, the characteristic of not-self, and also a little bit about how we might begin exploring this directly in our experience.

Directly connecting with these three fundamental characteristics of experience, directly realizing not just the idea of impermanence but the direct recognition of seeing things change in our experience—directly seeing the unreliability, how because it's impermanent it is unreliable, and directly seeing the insubstantiality, that's another way to express this not-self nature, the insubstantiality, the transient flux of experience—these have a deep impact on our minds when we directly experience them.

These three characteristics, seeing these three characteristics, actually perceiving them in our experience, is insight. This is what gives insight meditation its name: the seeing into these three characteristics.

There are different kinds of insights. Sometimes we can, in meeting our experience, come to some understandings about how our psychology came to be, some of the patterns and habits that we are very familiar with, how those came to be for us. Those kinds of realizations I would call psychological insights, and they are very powerful also. In my own experience, that kind of recognition—the recognition of seeing that my own patterns are just impermanent, subject to causes and conditions, just created by causes and conditions, seeing how history formed those patterns and put them together—that kind of recognition has allowed me to more easily meet those patterns. There's not so much fear, so much identification. There's not so much investment in those patterns. So they can be simply met with mindfulness.

The insights into these three characteristics are the insights that really liberate us. They not only teach us something about how our psychology is put together, but they deeply change our mindstream. The insight into impermanence: when the mind deeply understands that things are impermanent, it won't bother to pick things up. It won't bother to cling to them. When it deeply understands the unreliability of our experience, the mind knows that clinging will lead to suffering. And when the mind deeply recognizes that there isn't anyone here to defend or protect, no self to defend or protect, there's no need for reactivity.

In the Buddha's second discourse called the Anatta-Lakkhana Sutta—the words mean anatta, not-self, lakkhana, characteristic, so the Discourse on the Characteristic of Not-Self—in this discourse, the Buddha described these three characteristics in terms of each other. I'd like to go over this discourse with you a little bit.

The discourse is primarily aimed at helping us understand this not-self characteristic. The first way the Buddha goes about pointing to this for us is to highlight the aspect of control. Often as we consider or relate to a sense of what we think of as self, there's an aspect of having some kind of control around it—the one who chooses, the one who decides. That's often a place where we feel like our self is, that there is someone who chooses, there is someone who decides, someone who seems to have some sort of control over this being, and that is what self is. So the Buddha begins the discourse by speaking to that.

He does this exploration through the framework of the aggregates that Joseph talked about last week. Essentially, looking at our experience through this framework of the aggregates, we see as we begin to look that there's nothing in our experience that lies outside of this framework. Everything that we experience falls into one of these five categories. Sometimes this term "aggregate" sounds like a complicated technical term, but the Pali term is khandha, and it simply means something like heap or bundle. It's a very non-technical word in the Pali.

And so these five heaps of things—heaps of stuff, as Guy Armstrong sometimes says, five heaps of stuff—describe all aspects of our experience. Nothing falls outside of those. When we look at our experience, everything that we experience falls into one of those five categories.

The Buddha uses this framework as a way to help us deconstruct this idea of self. He says, "Form is

non-self." In this translation, Bhikkhu Bodhi is translating *anatta* as non-self. "Form is non-self. For if form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to determine a form. Let my form be thus. Let my form not be thus. But because form is non-self, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to determine a form. Let my form be thus. Let my form not be thus."

So this is referring to our body. He's saying body is not self because we can't say, "Body, be this." We can't say, "Body, don't age. Body, don't have that pain." He says that's evidence, essentially, for the not-self nature of body.

So we might think, okay, well, body isn't self, but surely there's something else in there that qualifies as self. So he goes on. Feeling is not self. Perception is not self. Volitional formations are non-self. And the last: consciousness is non-self. "For if consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to determine consciousness. Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus. But because consciousness is non-self, consciousness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to determine consciousness. Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus."

How many of us would, if we could, say, "Let my consciousness be calm, peaceful, at ease"? We can't do that. The Buddha points to this as undermining this belief, essentially, that we have around this aspect of control—that something here is the controller, that this is what constitutes being who I am.

He goes on to talk about the other two characteristics and actually points to them, saying everything in our experience is impermanent. Form is impermanent. Feelings are impermanent. Perception is impermanent. Volitional formations are impermanent. Consciousness is impermanent. Because these are impermanent, they are unreliable. And the question he poses to the monks that he's talking to, to the practitioners he's talking to, is: Is something that is impermanent and unreliable worthy to call self? Is it something that makes sense to call self—something that is impermanent and unreliable?

This comes back again to this question of what do we call self. As we think about it, as we reflect on it, there is often a sense that something we call self has a sense of stability, a sense of some kind of permanence. In the time of the Buddha, one of the kinds of self they were looking for was a transcendent self that was permanent and blissful. This teaching was directly pointing to that sense of self as being something that cannot be found.

We can certainly, through meditation, attain states that are blissful, but they are impermanent. They come, they go. They're brought together based on causes and conditions. They fall apart based on causes and conditions.

So in this part of the sutta, the Buddha is really encouraging us to look at what we call self and to explore: Does it make sense? Does what we call self—because there is something that we call self—actually stand up to investigation? Does it stand up to what we think of it as being when we investigate it?

We'll come back to that in a little while. It can sometimes help, in exploring this concept of not-self, to

think of it in terms of some analogies that help us understand what is being said. One thing I said earlier is that another way to think of this idea of not-self is to recognize that what we think of as self isn't a thing—it's rather a flux, a flow, an ever-changing stream.

Experience and we impute—essentially impute—a concept to that ever-changing flow of experience, and that concept is what we are identifying as self. But we don't see it as a concept. We don't see it as a process in the mind that is creating this concept. We see it as a thing.

Let me offer a couple of analogies. The first is the analogy of a river. I like this analogy. It's fairly apt because our experience, when we meet it with mindfulness, feels kind of like a flow, a stream, a river of experience.

So what is a river? The water in the river is continually changing. We can't take a bucket of water out of the river and say, "That's the river." We can't even point to the flow of water in the river and say, "That's the river," because that water is never the same water. It's always different water. Instant by instant, it's different water.

Perhaps the riverbed. Maybe the riverbed might be the river. Well, the riverbed without the water doesn't seem like much of a river. And even the riverbed changes after a flood. The actual course of that riverbed can change depending on causes and conditions. The river's name doesn't seem to be the river either.

And yet there is something that we understand to be river. We can give a river a name and we can talk about it. Actually, I think that process of giving something a name so that we can talk about it is part of what cements this idea of thing in our minds. The process of perception, misunderstood essentially, creates this idea that there's something there, as opposed to it being a convenient shortcut.

And so there is something that makes up what we would call a river, just as there is something that makes up what we would call us—what we would call me or myself. There's something going on here. A process is happening, a process that is related moment to moment by a chain of cause and effect. And yet the thing that we think of as self doesn't exist in the way that we think of it. It's not that there's nothing there. It's not that there's nothing that exists, but it doesn't exist in the way that we think of it existing.

There's a sutta that speaks to this, one of my favorites: "This world, for the most part, depends upon a duality—upon the idea of existence and the idea of nonexistence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom..." And the Buddha elsewhere refers to the world as being this fathom-long body. "In this fathom-long body lies the world." So he's talking about the world of experience here.

"For one who sees the origin of the world"—for one who sees the arising of experience as it really is with correct wisdom—"there is no idea of non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom"—that is, for one who sees things passing away out of experience, experience ending with correct wisdom—"there is no idea of existence in regard to the

world."

So when one sees that experiences are constantly arising, there's no idea that things don't exist. And when one sees that things are constantly ending, there's no idea that things do exist. The Buddha goes on to say that rather than existence or non-existence, there's a process of things coming into being and falling apart. And this process is a causally arisen process. Things arise dependent on causes and conditions. Experience arises in dependence on causes and conditions, I should really say. So what we experience as self comes into being through a process of conditions coming together. And we fundamentally misunderstand it to be something, to be a thing.

Another analogy that points to conditions coming together to create something, to create an experience, is the analogy of a rainbow. A rainbow seems like a thing. You can see the rainbow. There's some kind of existence within the rainbow. It's clear. We can see it. We can talk about it. And yet with the rainbow, conditions have to come together just right in order for that rainbow to be seen. There needs to be water in the sky. There needs to be sun at an angle through which it can pass through the water and meet an observer. These three things have to be in relation to each other—the observer, the water, the sun—all in the correct position with respect to each other. If one of those three is in some other place, if the observer is a few miles further on, they may not see the rainbow because the orientation is incorrect.

So does the rainbow exist, or does it not exist? We can't really talk about it that way. It comes together based on conditions.

When I talk about this teaching of not-self as being a pointer to the flux of experience, sometimes the question comes up: what's the difference between impermanence and not-self? Isn't flux just another term for impermanence? I'd like to explore this a little bit.

In my own experience, there's a kind of difference—I have seen a difference in how the recognitions of impermanence and not-self are felt. With impermanence, it can feel like you're watching something come into being and watching something go out of being. It's kind of startling.

I remember on one retreat in Burma, there was a room with some large posts, and people were doing walking meditation while others were sitting. At one point I was sitting, and a few people were doing walking meditation. I opened my eyes and saw this person move behind a post so that I could no longer see them. And they vanished. In my mind, they vanished. That person just was not there. It's startling. There was a person there, an object, something—a thing. And then that person was not there. That person disappeared.

So with the insight into impermanence, there can be a sense of there being something that appears and disappears. The insight into not-self, in my experience, is the recognition that there isn't anything there. There's not actually a thing there. As things come into being, they're already falling apart. So it has a different flavor to it, this insight into not-self. There's nothing actually there. There's no thing there. There

is a process happening. It's not that there's nothing, but there isn't something.

It's not uncommon for people to express or feel a sense of discomfort around this teaching, to have almost a feeling of fear around this idea. Listened to from the perspective of self, this teaching doesn't make any sense at all. And listened to from the perspective of self, there can be a sense of, "Well, what's going to happen to me?" This is certainly familiar to me. I've experienced this kind of sense of fear. And that fear usually is not around the experience of not-self, but around the idea of the teaching of not-self.

I find it really interesting to contrast the way we relate to impermanence and the way we relate to not-self from the intellectual standpoint. Everybody knows things are impermanent. It doesn't seem to really bother people too much when you're just thinking about it. You go out and talk to people on the street—are things impermanent? Yeah, sure, things are impermanent. It doesn't disturb people. But when we start talking about this concept of not-self, it feels a little disturbing. And it also just seems completely wrong on top of it. It's like, this cannot be right.

So with impermanence, there's this kind of matter-of-fact, casual response: "Yeah, that teaching, no problem, I understand that." And with not-self, there's this fear that happens. But when we actually move into the experiential world of these insights, it kind of gets reversed. Because when we start seeing things—particularly when we start seeing things disappear, when we start seeing things vanish—things start to feel really unstable. That insight into the ending of things, the impermanent nature of things, everything ending, ending, ending—that experience brings up quite a bit of discomfort. The actual experience of impermanence is not one that you can just say, "Oh yeah, no problem."

The insight into not-self is a relief.

When we really see that there's no one here to defend or to protect, there's no problem. I find this interesting—the way the idea creates so much distress, and yet the insight itself is so relieving.

It seems to us that there's plenty of evidence for self. When we think about what self is, it's just kind of obvious to us that there's a self there. That feeling itself is the confirmation that self exists. The feeling seems to be a good part of the evidence—of course self exists, I feel it. And not only that, the view or the belief, the idea in self, is so powerful that it filters how we view our world.

There is actually a lot of evidence for not-self out there. But because we view our experience through this lens of self, we conveniently ignore all of the evidence to the contrary. This is a fundamental way our mind deludes us. This is a capacity of delusion—that when we look at experience through a certain lens, that's what we see. What we see then confirms our belief.

The Buddha actually pointed to some of this evidence. He mentioned that consciousness is not self: if consciousness were self, it would be possible to say, "Let my consciousness be thus." I'll point to a really concrete example here. When you sit down to meditate and place your attention on your breath or on the flow of changing experience—with an intention of choosing to be present with that experience—and the

mind wanders, who did that? Who did that wandering? If you did the wandering, then were you the one that decided to stay put?

And even more amazing, even more mind-blowing, is the fact that out of that spaced-out place—where it seems like there's not much choice or control, the mind on autopilot, doing its thing, running on habits and patterns—suddenly mindfulness reappears. Who did that? Causes and conditions came together for mindfulness to reappear. It's as simple as that. There's no one there doing this.

So how do we explore this in our practice? I've mostly been talking about the idea, the concept so far. But what does it mean to actually begin to recognize this in our actual experience?

The teaching that the Buddha gave in the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta points us in the direction, I think. There he suggests we look at our experience for what we call self and begin to investigate it. Does it really hold up to that investigation?

There's a famous quote by Dōgen that many of you are familiar with: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."

To study this teaching, we study what feels like self. When we study this, when we get familiar with this feeling, with what we are calling self, we begin to see—and I think Rebecca said this very beautifully the other morning—that as we study this, as we look at what we're calling self, we may see at some point that it falls apart. And then we get a taste of what this not-self teaching means.

Or we may, through studying self, begin to see it arising. We see that out of causes and conditions, a particular pattern or habit of selfing comes to be. The angry self or the frustrated self comes into being out of these habits and patterns. It wasn't there, and there it is. We see this self coming into being.

Or we might start to see, as we explore what we are calling self, that what we call self actually changes quite rapidly into widely different experiences.

Let me go through some of these ways. First, just some reflection. You might go through this with me, in your own experience, asking yourself: What is it that you call self? What in your experience is it that you identify as self?

Sometimes it includes a sense of solidity, a sense of thingness, a sense of continuity—often a continuity from past to future, from past to present, where memory plays a big role. Because I can remember things, there must be someone who remembers. Because there is memory, there must be someone who remembers. That sense of continuity.

It might be the sense of the one who's in control, the one who decides, the one who chooses. It might be the sense of being the one who feels or knows.

At one point in my practice, I could really clearly see that I wasn't doing the knowing, that I wasn't

choosing what to know. Knowing was happening, and yet it felt like I was the one experiencing what was known. I think that's a pretty common, deeper kind of sense of self—being the one who experiences.

So it's often a vague kind of feeling. Actually, when we start to look at it, it's a vague kind of feeling, and it's hard to actually pin it down, to actually pin down what we mean by self. It's more of a feeling in a way. But there's something there that feels really solid.

I'd compare it to the way we observe pain. When you first start to meditate and start to observe painful experience, it feels like a solid thing—some thing there, a block of some kind. And then when we turn our attention into it, we really realize there's no thing that we call pain. It's actually a lively, changing process, an experience of flux and flow. You can't really say, "Well, that's the pain," because when you find that one point it vanishes, and then the experience moves over just a few inches. There's no one thing that is the pain.

It's kind of similar as we start to observe what we call self. It seems solid until we start to look at it, and then it shifts and changes. We can't quite pin it down. This too is evidence for not-self.

And yet what we seem to do, because that view is so strong, we seem to think, "Well, I must just not be looking at it right. I must just not be seeing it right." Or if somebody points out a contradiction to us—like the Buddha asking us to go through all of these aspects of experience, and we find it's not there, it's not there, it's not there—we can agree it's not there, but it must be someplace else, because that view is so strong.

So the encouragement is to actually turn towards this feeling. What is it? Sometimes this feeling can be really clear, and this is a good time to really start to play with this teaching. Actually, this seems to happen when some of our beliefs about self are challenged. That seems to be when the feeling of self gets really strong.

As long as everything is corresponding to our views of how things should be, how I am, how other people should behave with respect to me—as long as things are moving along in line with our views—we don't particularly notice self. That sense of self is more vague. It's like, well, there's no problem, so there's no sense of that solidity. But as soon as there's something that kind of points out to us that that belief or view may not be in line with reality, then the feeling of self hits us in the face. The feeling of self-righteousness, for example—"I'm right, you're wrong"—this comes because there's some kind of rub between our view of how things should be and how things actually are.

So this is a good time to explore this sense of self.

I'll give you an example from my own practice of this kind of exploration. On one retreat, I was suffering from the "I'm a failure" pattern quite frequently. I felt like I couldn't meditate. I felt like everybody else could meditate, and I was a failure. I was a bad yogi. I would notice that, and there was a lot of suffering around that pattern.

At some point on that same retreat, it began to become really clear to me in very short periods of time—because I was suffering from this feeling of "I don't know how to practice, I can't be mindful"—I would take a step and feel the sensations of the foot on the ground. Mindfulness! I'm a good yogi. And then suddenly, "Oh, I can't feel anything. Oh, I'm a bad yogi." It was like, whoa—wow, this is interesting. I'm a good yogi. I'm a bad yogi. This "I" was in my face. This "I am" was in my face.

So exploring it.

What is it? What was I feeling? Really, what was happening around self was largely these ideas, views, beliefs. This is a large part of where self comes into play. We have views. We have beliefs around how things should be. And from the perspective of my ideal, I should be a good yogi. When my own experience didn't measure up to how I thought it should be, I was a failure.

One thing this pointed out so clearly to me was that when I felt like I was a good yogi, it didn't feel like there was a problem. That was how it was supposed to be. When I felt like a failure, that was where the problem seemed to be. But at some point I began to recognize that the feeling of failure was intimately tied to the idea I had about what being a good yogi was. And that sense of "I'm a good yogi" was a setup.

So actually, for me in exploring this process of self, what I really saw I needed to do was look at that praise, that self-praise I was doing. I did also need to recognize when I was telling myself I was a failure—both sides of it are equally nonsense. But the conditions for the arising of that failure were directly connected to the attachment to that feeling of being a good yogi.

This is where the rub comes in. This is where our views don't meet reality. My idea of being a good yogi was like continuous mindfulness. This doesn't happen very often. Mind wanders. Every time the mind wanders, "Oh, I'm a failure." So the rub of our views of self, our view of who I am or want to be—when that meets reality and there is suffering, this is a great place to explore the sense of self. This is a pointer for us. Actually, whenever there's suffering, there's some kind of sense of self, some kind of "you" there.

The process by which self is created, by which the experience of self is created—that selfing process, the process by which that comes to be—is the same process by which suffering comes to be. So you're already doing this. You're already exploring this in your experience. When you're exploring and meeting the experience of unsatisfactoriness, of dukkha, you're exploring this process of selfing, whether or not it feels that way.

You can also notice when this feeling of self arises. Sometimes we get into places where things are pretty quiet. There's not much grasping, not much clinging going on. Things feel pretty stable, pretty calm. And then suddenly something happens and there's our self, right in our face.

On one retreat, I was in a place where things were relatively neutral for quite a good stretch of time. And I was beginning to notice there was subtle reactivity to that neutral experience—just being in the walking meditation, noticing neutral experience. There'd be this little bit of leaning into the neutral experience, a

little bit of expectation. "Ooh, maybe something will happen." A little bit of wanting there. And when nothing happened, "I'm a failure." Out of nothing, the mind just creating this pattern. Neutral experience, a little bit of wanting, that expectation doesn't get met, and I'm a failure. This is self arising right in the moment. I saw it in that moment and I actually smiled at it. It's like, look at that! Wow! Out of nothing, the mind created a failure.

We can also see a rapidly changing sense of self sometimes. As we start to feel into what we're calling self, we begin to see that we've got a lot of different selves in there. There's committees in there, all different ages. I was doing some walking meditation out here on one three-month course, and I had some reactivity to some of the questions in the hall. I was arguing in my mind with the questions, with how things were being discussed and described in the question and answer period. And I was noticing that I was arguing in my mind, and I could feel this sense of—I remember feeling a sense of the forty-year-old, analytical, argumentative me. And I was feeling into that, trying to be with it, understand it.

And it felt so sticky. I didn't really see how to tease it apart. It just was so complicated and so *me*.

I was doing the walking meditation, and this truck drives up—big, loud brakes squealing, doors banging open. And instantly, the mind switched from that argumentative forty-year-old to: "It's a truck! Wow, that's amazing!" I felt like I was two years old. Just like that.

That was quite a startling lesson for me, seeing how these senses of self change. So look—what are you taking yourself to be in your experience? What is it that you think of as self?

The last piece I'll explore about this teaching is another teaching of the Buddha that Greg mentioned yesterday morning in the instructions. He talked about the teaching to Bahiya, and this is actually a very beautiful teaching.

Bahiya came to the Buddha and asked him for the teachings in brief. And the Buddha responded: "You should train yourself thus. In the seen is only the seen. In the heard is only the heard. In the sensed is only the sensed. In the cognized is only the cognized. This is how you should train yourself."

So he started there. And that's the training. That's what we do. We meet our experience. This is where I began the talk—just meeting our direct experience underneath the level of concept. In the seen is only the seen.

And the Buddha goes on in this teaching. He says, so this is the practice. The simplicity of just meeting experience is the practice. And then the Buddha states what the results of this practice are: "When for you in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard, in the sensed is only the sensed, in the cognized is only the cognized—then, Bahiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there's no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor in between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

The Buddha points to this as a result of practice. It's an insight. We don't have to believe it even. Just come back to the simplicity of experience. In the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard. Underneath the level of concept, in the cognized is only the cognized—recognizing concept as just another construction of the mind, as opposed to believing it as a thing. When for you this is the case, there is no you in terms of that, no you there.

So we don't need to believe this teaching. We don't even need to think about it. You can really let this whole talk go out of your minds and just come back to the simplicity of meeting your experience moment to moment. Trust in that. The insights come out of that.

Let's sit together for a few moments.

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