Reflections on Non-Self

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 58:59

Of all the Buddhist teachings, those about non-self or not-self are probably the most elusive. We can easily understand, at least conceptually and to a large extent experientially, the truth of impermanence. And we've all tasted the truth of suffering in our lives, or the unsatisfying quality of impermanent conditions. But non-self runs counter to even our common sense. Our whole lives revolve around this idea of a self, an "I." And yet, this understanding of selflessness is essential—it's an essential part of every Buddhist tradition.

In the Theravada tradition from the Pali texts, when the Buddha is giving advice to his son Rahula, who had become a monk, one of the classic teachings he gave was this: "See everything in the light of perfect wisdom. This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself." That's with regard to every arising phenomena.

From the Tibetan teachings, one of the very greatest masters of the last century was Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He wrote: "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in realms of samsara for countless past lifetimes. It is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that one thought of 'I,' you would find it easy to be free and to free others too."

There's one teaching from an 11th century Korean Zen master, Chinul, that I've really appreciated a lot over all these years and the way he framed our practice. He framed it in the context of sudden awakening, gradual cultivation. He's pointing to the possibility that we can each have moments of sudden awakening to really quite transforming truths and realizations. And that sudden awakening, that insight, that understanding then needs to be cultivated in our lives.

Tonight, rather than a usual well-structured Dharma talk, I'd like to share with you some of the experiences I've had during the last few years of my own retreats—those kinds of insights or understandings that had that flavor of a sudden awakening to something that I didn't understand before. They all revolve around, in some way, freeing ourselves from this notion of self, of "I." Sometimes they came just as intuitive reflections. Sometimes they came through the words of a book. Or sometimes passages from the suttas, from the discourses that I may have read countless times before, and then just reading them once more on retreat, the words kind of jump out and I understand them in a new way. So this evening's talk is going to be a collage of different experiences.

The first one is, in a way, perhaps the simplest to understand. It's kind of just a commonplace reflection, but it struck me deeply: how for each one of us, we are the stars of our own life stories. We have become the center of our own universe. And that's how we live our lives. But of course, for 7.28 billion people in

the world, they don't even know I exist.

This came home even more personally when I was thinking about a friend, who I don't see that often, but we're close friends, who's going through quite a difficult time. I realized that as she's dealing with her own life story, I probably don't play any role at all in it. And so there was just that sense of disappearing in a certain way from thinking my own story was so important or so central. It kind of dissolved it in a way.

I think this perspective can loosen our attachment, our identification with our own particular dramas. It's not to say that we don't engage with them, and they're not relatively important for us. But they are not the center of the universe. And most of the universe is completely unaware of it. So it's just a little something to keep in mind.

To get to a little more profound Dharma: there was a famous Burmese monk, Ledi Sayadaw, who was both a great practitioner and also a very great scholar of Buddhism. I was reading some of his teachings and came across a passage where he outlined an example of wrong view in our lives—basic wrong view. And it was basically about everything we believe.

This was the list of what he considered wrong view: the feeling that I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm excited, I'm angry, I'm afraid, I'm interested, I'm planning, I'm deciding, I'm choosing. It was a whole long list. It's how we live our lives. It was all wrong view. Why? Because of the "I." I am this, I am that. And so it really just struck me that we need to take a look at that.

This is a teaching that gets to the very heart of how we're living—whether we're living with a right or wise understanding, or living in the realm of wrong view.

So I came up with a framework, a short little teaching. I called it "From Am to Is." Instead of "I'm angry, I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm eating, I'm walking, I'm planning, I'm judging," we shift to: "There is anger, there is love, there is walking, there is eating, there is tasting." Just making that shift in the way we're both conceptualizing and experiencing the different activities of our lives.

It would be very interesting for you, as you're going through the day, to keep an eye out for the many times there's that feeling of "I am," of "I'm doing something." I'm walking, or I'm eating, or I'm thinking. Just watch for when that sense of "I am" is strong—and it happens frequently throughout the day. Get a sense of what that feels like, this sense of "I am." I think you'll see that there's a certain contraction of our being. It's like we collapse everything into this sense of "I am whatever"—I'm doing this, I'm thinking this, I'm feeling this.

Then in that moment, simply reframe it as "there is." There is eating, there is walking, there is happiness, there is sadness. And just in that moment of shifting the framework, notice what that feels like. I think you'll experience, as you go from "am" to "is," a certain release, a certain spaciousness, a certain openness. Instead of being contracted in the "I am," there's just the openness of awareness of what is.

If you remember from the first morning's instructions, I suggested using the phrase "there is a body" as a way of settling into the sitting. It's very interesting to do that in the walking as well. When you're walking, you might go from that sense of "I'm walking," but even if you don't have that strong sense, just bring to mind the phrase "there is a body" as you're walking. Something quite remarkable happens. You're walking at any speed—this can be at a more normal speed or a slower speed—and you establish "there is a body." We're creating a framework for our awareness of the whole body.

What's so interesting is that as we do that, the sense of the body disappears. There's actually no body. What we begin to experience is just sensations in space. From opening that framework and getting away from the "I am" sense, the body disappears, and we begin to get a sense of the selflessness of it all. What's being known in that moment is simply different sensations arising and passing in space, in openness, in emptiness. It gives us a taste, a real connection to what selflessness—the experience of selflessness—actually is.

If you think this is not so important, I want to read just a couple of lines from the Buddha. He said, "By rightly understanding 'I am,' one makes an end of suffering." That's a pretty clear statement. By rightly understanding the sense "I am," one makes an end of suffering. He also said, "The eradication of 'I am' is the attainment of nibbāna here and now."

So this is worth experimenting with. It can give us a real taste of freedom in that sudden awakening. And of course there needs to be a gradual cultivation of that experience and that realization. But it can point to something very profound.

I like this framework of sudden awakening, gradual cultivation, because so often we practice with the idea, "Oh well, I'll practice for the next thirty years and maybe I'll realize something." But actually, sudden awakening to these moments of transforming understanding can happen in any moment. It can happen now, if we know how to direct the mind, to direct the attention. So I'd really encourage you to experiment and explore this particular framework—from "am" to "is"—noticing when the "I am" is strong during the day, and in those very moments recognizing: there is whatever is happening. Begin to see that, feel that, and experience it for yourselves.

We create a strong sense of separation, a sense of self, very predominantly through the attachment we have to our views and opinions about things. With some degree of awareness, you might have noticed that we have a lot of opinions about things we know nothing about.

That does not stop us from having opinions about it.

Just one example of this, which was very striking to me and was very freeing: this goes back years, many years, when I was first teaching at Naropa in 1975. One of the great Tibetan masters, Dudjom Rinpoche, had come to visit. He was really one of the great masters. And there was a poster advertising a talk he was giving. The poster said, "Dudjom Rinpoche," time and place of the talk, and then "incarnation of

Sariputra."

Now Sariputra was the chief disciple of the Buddha. And in the Theravada tradition, when you're fully enlightened, you don't come back. I had spent the last, I don't know how many years, immersed in this tradition and understanding. So when I saw this, my mind went on tilt, because here's this great master—this was not just some ordinary person, this was a great enlightened master—incarnation of Sariputra. That's impossible.

And out of that moment of tilt, I realized that I really had no idea. All I knew was that the Theravada tradition said this, and the Tibetan tradition said that, but it was completely outside my realm of experience to assess which was true, which was right, which was wrong. And it was such a freeing moment to realize that I did not have to have an opinion about that which I didn't know. I recommend it.

So we just stay open. We're not drawing conclusions. Well, maybe this is true, maybe that is true, maybe they're both true in some mysterious way.

Many people have asked about the relationship of metta and vipassana. One way of understanding the relationship is that metta is really operating on the relative level of being, of self, of oneself to another. And vipassana is really trying to understand the more ultimate level of selflessness and emptiness. That is one way of understanding the relationship.

But there's also another way. There's a way that metta and the feeling of metta actually has a liberating function, can take us out of the sense of self. I want to share with you something that was profoundly transforming for me.

In situations of conflict, when there's some big conflict going on with another person, that conflict is often fed and sustained by our attachment to being right, or to feeling right. And that can fuel our emotions for a long time.

Some time ago, I had been involved in a situation like that. Very problematic situation, a lot of strong feelings on both sides. I was on retreat, and this had been going on for quite a while. There was a lot of suffering involved, a lot of feeling of separation and judgment. And of course, as I'm sure you can relate to, my mind was just going over this again and again and again. I became the best lawyer in the world for my case, you know, over and over again, all the arguments for why I was right—because of course I was right.

This went on—this was the retreat, but when something very powerful is happening in our lives, the mind can really churn it out.

Then I happened to come across and read quite a remarkable book called *Tattoos on the Heart*. Maybe some of you have heard of it. It's written by a man named Gregory Boyle, who is a Jesuit priest living in LA, working and living right in the midst of all the gangs down there, working with the kids and teenagers and young adults who are killing each other. This is a violent situation. And the conditions in which the

kids grow up, which he outlines in the book—you can see where that violence comes from, because the conditions of their lives have been so terrible.

And the stance that he holds in the midst of all this violence, with regard to all the kids involved, is love no matter what. No matter what they've done—and sometimes it's horrendous, they're killing each other and killing innocent bystanders in the process—love no matter what.

The way he writes, he writes very beautifully and very simply. The book transmits that feeling. You really get a sense of what that could mean. And there's a lot of heartwarming humor in the book as well. He talks about how many of the kids actually are transformed by his "love no matter what." It's such an absolute stance that he has managed to embody.

Very inspiring. One of the lines in the book, when people were describing his work and talking about the kids, was: "You can't disappoint us enough, no matter what you do. You're not going to disappoint us, because it's love no matter what."

So I was reading this book in the midst of my own lawyering, and I started using a little mantra which was a precursor to "love no matter what." That little mantra that I started using as I was thinking about all this conflict and about how right I was and how wrong the other person was—just that whole thing.

I just started repeating to myself, inspired by this book and by his work and his being: endlessly forgiving. Endlessly forgiving. It doesn't matter what happened. It doesn't matter the situation. Endlessly forgiving.

And it was so interesting. Whenever my mind would start churning again about the situation—all the reasons, all the justification, the being right—it doesn't matter. Endlessly forgiving. And that morphed into "love, no matter what." It doesn't matter. And it's the "no matter what" part that really is the liberating function, because there's no back door. It doesn't matter.

What I experienced was like coming out of the prison of self and self-justification into the space of love no matter what. It was just the dissolving of that contraction of self and "I" fueled by "I'm right." So it was really profoundly transforming to see the possibility of that space—that we don't have to stay imprisoned in self-justification in whatever situation we're in. It's love no matter what. That's a vastly superior way of being than being right with attachment to that and the contraction of that.

This was an example, and for me it was like a new level of understanding—a new level of seeing how that feeling of love no matter what, which is really mettā, dissolves the boundaries of self. So it's not just on the relative level of this being to that being. It opens up to a space where we realize that love and emptiness of self are the same thing. Love and emptiness are really the same.

So that's where our practice is leading, whether we're doing vipassanā or we're doing mettā. And I think it's helpful to explore that realm, explore that possibility. Seven point two billion people don't know I exist. From "am" to "is." Love no matter what. All of these are ways of opening up to this understanding of

selflessness.

The next reflection that had a very interesting effect on my practice had to do with a new application of the understanding, the teaching about the five aggregates. Those of you who are familiar with the Buddha's teachings will know this. Those of you who are new to the teachings may not be familiar with this terminology.

The five aggregates are the Buddha's way of analyzing the entirety of our experience, the entirety of this mind-body process, of everything we experience. The Buddha analyzed it in terms of five different aggregates or elements of experience. First is the physical sensations—the physical world, the material world, the body. The second aggregate is feeling tone, which we've discussed: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—how we taste experience. The third aggregate is perception, which is that faculty of recognition. We look at something and we see a tree, we recognize it as a tree, or a house, or a car, or a person. That quality of recognition, of naming—the whole world of concepts is perception. I'm going to talk a little more about that.

The fourth aggregate is mental formations—all of the mental activity beside feeling tone and perception, which were singled out because they're particularly important. So everything: anger, happiness, sadness, compassion, love, concentration, mindfulness, delusion—all of that is in this aggregate of mental formations. And the fifth aggregate is consciousness, the knowing faculty.

Now for years I read about this. It's on almost every page of the suttas, of the discourses. The Buddha talked about this a lot because when we understand that our whole experience is simply the dance of these aggregates, and we see the impermanent nature of each of those aggregates, that is the doorway to realizing that there's no self behind them. Everything we think of as self or as "I" is really just a play of the aggregates.

I had read this endless times, heard endless talks about it, usually quite bored in listening to them, because for a long time it just sounded very technical and philosophical and I didn't really get it. But over the years of practice and reading and beginning to apply—asking myself, "Can I look at this really as an instruction rather than as a description? Can I begin to look at my experience in this way?"—it began to take on a lot more meaning as a doorway to understanding the selfless nature of it all.

For those of you who are relatively new to the teachings and the practice and are not familiar with this, it would be worth doing a little study after the retreat, just to learn more about it, because it's a very essential framework for understanding.

So it could be a way of further exploring.

Okay, all of this is just the precursor to what happened on the retreat. There's one description the Buddha gave of the aggregates, quite a famous passage. He said the body, or the material elements, is like a lump of foam. Feeling tones are like bubbles in a stream. Perceptions are like a mirage. Mental formations are

like a plantain tree, like a banana tree. Those trees have no core—there's no pith. You can peel it all away and there's nothing at the center. So all formations in the mind are like a plantain tree. And consciousness is like a magic show.

This is a passage I've read many times. The body is like a lump of foam, feelings like bubbles on a stream. But on this one retreat, again—this is something I recommend in reading the Buddhist teachings—it's so easy to read them as a description instead of as an instruction. When we read it as a description, we go, "Oh yeah, that's nice, it's a poetic description." But that doesn't really have much transformative value.

So in this particular retreat, I started taking it as an instruction—the body as a lump of foam. When I was sitting and feeling all the different sensations of the body, I let that image settle into the way I was experiencing. The body as a lump of foam. And it is like that. It's just different sensations. There's no solidity. When we really drop into the actuality of what we're experiencing, what we call the body is really just different sensations here and there, appearing and disappearing. The image helps us see that, if we actually employ it.

Something very remarkable happened just by using that image in this experiential way. Are you familiar in your practice with the experience of being with something *in order for* it to become something else? We're with the pain in order for it to decrease. We're with the breath in order to become more calm. We're leaning into the process, even if it's just leaning into the next moment. There's that tendency to be leaning into the unfolding aspect of the process, as if it's going to unfold finally into something or other that we think is desirable.

Well, when I used that image—the lump of foam, the body is a lump of foam—it cut that leaning into the next moment. Because I realized: the body is a lump of foam in this moment. It's going to be a lump of foam in the next moment. It will always be a lump of foam. And so there's nothing to become. Do you get a sense of it? It was like dropping back completely, just here in the lump of foamness.

This is significant because one of the aspects of the cause of suffering—when the Buddha talked about craving as being the cause of suffering—it's not only craving for sense pleasures. He talked about the craving for becoming. That wanting the next moment, or leaning into the unfolding process. So when we cut that craving—the body is a lump of foam, it will always be a lump of foam, there's nothing to want, nothing to do, nothing to have—we're just with that. That's a freeing moment. That's a moment of sudden awakening, a moment of non-craving.

So we can employ the image of feeling tones as bubbles on a stream. Using the lump of foam, the body as that, we see that the feeling tone of each of those sensations that make up this lump of foam—each one has a particular feeling tone to it. It's either pleasant or it's unpleasant. And we see they are like bubbles on a stream.

They're there for a moment and they're gone. They're there for a moment and they're gone. And the more

attentive we are to the moment, we begin to see this, and so become much less reactive to these feeling tones. Instead of pleasant leading to "I want more," or unpleasant triggering "push it away," it's just bubbles on a stream, arising and passing in each moment.

Perception as a mirage. We're living in the world of our perceptions, and it's very easy to become aware of this, particularly in the domain of seeing. For some reason, in retreats we don't emphasize being mindful of seeing so much, but it actually is one of the most profound and freeing aspects, so I want to give a little emphasis to it now.

For many, if not most people—for people with intact, working eyes—seeing is probably the predominant sense field of our lives. We are living in and moving through the world of what's being seen. And in the seeing, perception plays a very predominant role. We are recognizing what we see, naming what we see, and then having reactions to what we see.

Something has come up in a few of the groups I've done which highlights the importance of understanding this. Some of you, probably just a few, may have had the experience of the judging mind. I had this, probably to the same extreme you have all had it: being on retreat, particularly at IMS, I would go into the dining room and my mind would have a judgment about almost every person there. I didn't like the way they walked, or the way they moved, or what they were wearing, or maybe I did like it—how much food they took, how quickly they were moving. All of it: judging, judging, judging. It was so ridiculous. And I was aware that it was ridiculous, and yet the mind kept doing it.

So I started to investigate: what's behind all this judging? Instead of going all psychological on it and digging back into my childhood, I realized that all of that judgment was born from seeing unmindfully. My mind was going out through the eye door, landing on all of these beings, and then having judgments about each one of them. So I started going into the dining room, and all I would do is note "seeing." Seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing—bringing mindfulness to that sense door contact. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the judgments stopped. Because what was feeding the judgment was not being mindful of seeing.

This is why bringing awareness or attention to perception is so important. And it's not only people in the dining room—this is our whole world. If we're not mindful that we're seeing, then our mind creates a whole world of perceptions that we're living in. And yet the perception is like a mirage. It's a mind-created world that we're living in.

This is something you could play with, and I would suggest you really spend some time as you move through the day or night, taking some time where you're making seeing the object of your meditation. Practice being mindful of seeing.

Then there's just a tiny little step further which you might also explore. I started changing the note from "seeing" to "perceiving." It's just an interesting shift. The shift is very hard to explain, but I would encourage you to do that and see for yourself. By noting "perceiving," somehow it strengthened the

understanding that what was being perceived, or the way of perceiving, was very conditioned—it was mirage-like.

As a way of understanding this conceptually: we're seeing and perceiving, and we think there's really a reality out there that we're perceiving, and we know what it is. But some being with a differently constructed eye—an insect, for example, or a bird, or some animal with an eye constructed in a different way—will perceive a completely different reality. Which one is real? Then you multiply that by countless beings with countless sense door structures. Everything that's perceived through the sense doors will be different depending on how that sense door is constructed. Where is the reality? Perception is like a mirage.

It's very interesting. It frees us from living in the sphere where things are so solid, where we understand the reality of it all. Everything becomes much more open, spacious, and fluid. This doesn't mean that we abandon the conventional consensual reality that we live in, because that would make life very difficult. But we don't have to give it some ultimate truth level.

The body is a lump of foam. Feeling tones are like bubbles in a stream. Perception is like a mirage. And formations—if you did nothing else but see this one, you would leave here ninety-five percent happier.

Mental formations, which is everything going on in our minds—all our stories and all our emotions and all our thoughts and all our planning and all our judging—it's like a plantain tree. Each one of those states, each one of those experiences has no core. There's no pith to it, no substance to it. They're all arising out of momentary conditions. The conditions change, the experience changes. It's just like cloud formations. Conditions come together in a certain way and clouds appear. Conditions change and they disappear.

If we could see, if we could experience all of our inner mental world, our emotional world, as a plantain tree—and we can do this in a moment. This is not a far-off realization. That's why these metaphors, taken as instructions, are very powerful. This is not just a description; this is a way to look. It's a freeing way to look at our experience. And in a moment—it may just be for a moment, it may just be for a glimpse—but we see, "Oh yeah, this anger, or this excitement, or this whatever it is, there's no substance to it. There's no pith." It's tremendously freeing to understand our experience in that way. So again, moments of sudden awakening that could happen in any moment.

Consciousness as a magic show. I mean, this whole big thing. So just one example of how we can begin to get a taste of that, a little magical display.

I was on retreat one time at the Forest Refuge and having lunch. And for some reason my mind just got interested in exploring taste consciousness, because I was eating and enjoying the tastes of the food. Now, in the Buddhist teaching, taste consciousness arises out of four conditions. There's a tongue, there's saliva, there is some food or something on the tongue, and there's attention. If all those conditions are there, taste consciousness will arise.

So I knew that from my study. And I just started playing. It's like a thought experiment. This is just a little sidebar—sometimes thought experiments can be very powerful. I had just read a biography of Einstein. His discoveries were all thought experiments. He was not an experimental physicist; he was a theoretical physicist. So his great revelations came through the power of his immensely creative thought process. This is not something to underestimate.

So I started having a little thought experiment with taste. I'm sitting there eating and tasting, tasting, and then I just imagined: would taste consciousness arise if there was no tongue? And it became clear that it wouldn't. Or take any one of those conditions away—taste consciousness would not be there. What that revealed, just in that moment of a precise thought experiment, was the conditioned nature of consciousness. That consciousness is not some solid reality that we can call self; it's arising out of conditions. Take one condition away, and it's not there.

We can do this with each of our senses. We can do it with seeing. We need a working eye, something coming in front of it, light, attention. Seeing consciousness arises.

Take any one of the conditions away, and that consciousness doesn't arise.

And so we get these moments of actually seeing the impermanent, magical, display-like quality of consciousness itself. There's nothing solid there to call self, to call "I."

When we're not mindful of the aggregates—that all of our experience is just this dance, just this dance of the aggregates: physical sensations and feeling tone and perceptions and all the mental formations and consciousness—when we're not mindful of that, we get identified in each moment with the body, or with our feelings, or with our emotions. And in that moment of identification, the sense of self is strengthened. We get imprisoned by it.

There's a teaching by Kalu Rinpoche, another great Tibetan teacher. He said, "We live in illusion and the appearance of things." So we're living in that world of the mirage of perception. "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we see that we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything. That is all."

Do you see the potential for freedom in this? When we let go of the imprisonment of self, the imprisonment of being identified with momentary arisings, the contraction of that. When we go from "am" to "is." As we experience that—and again, it can be just for moments at a time—we see that we are nothing. There's no one there behind experience to whom it's happening. There is a reality, which is just the dance of all these elements. When we understand this, we see that we are nothing, and being nothing, we are everything. That is all.

The last possibility for sudden awakening that I'll talk about this evening is a shortcut to Nibbana. This was a teaching that appears in the suttas a lot. I read it countless times and never applied it. Then on one retreat, I read it again and thought, "Why don't I see for myself if this is true?" In applying it as an

instruction, it became clear—there's something here.

It's a very short teaching. It says, "In seeing impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. When the mind doesn't cling, it is not agitated. When it is not agitated, it personally attains Nibbana."

I had taken it just as a description of things. But on this one retreat, I said, "Why don't you check it out? See if it's really meaningful and experienceable."

It's possible. At those times when you are directly experiencing the flow of changes—it could be just in the experience of changing sensations in a step, or the changing sensations of the breath, or more open awareness with things arising and passing—whenever you're in that space of really seeing the flow of phenomena, at that time, in seeing impermanence, check back in the mind to see whether there's clinging or not.

Very interesting. What I saw, and I think you will as well, is that actually in moments of seeing impermanence, the mind is not clinging. Because if it were clinging, it wouldn't be seeing the flow. So we can get a direct experience and taste of the mind of no clinging, because we're experiencing it in that moment.

Check it out. Really see for yourself. When the mind is seeing impermanence, it doesn't cling. So we see if that's true. When it doesn't cling, it's not agitated. Check that out too. When you're in this flow, when you're seeing, looking at the mind and seeing that it's not clinging, notice whether it's agitated or not. I think you'll find that when the mind is not clinging, it is not agitated.

So by looking directly, we begin to experience and taste the non-agitated mind. We're in that experience of non-agitation, and we're recognizing it, we're seeing it. And right in that space, we can get a sense, an intuitive sense. Yes, it's out of that stillness, out of that non-agitation that the possibility of freedom, of Nibbana, can arise. There is a visceral taste of it in the non-agitation.

So again, these are a few very simple short steps to enlightenment. Seeing impermanence—mind not clinging. Mind not clinging—non-agitated. Non-agitated—the doorway opens. Go for it.

So there's all of this. But how do we bring this realization, how do we integrate this understanding—or these sudden awakenings to selflessness, the emptiness of self—into the process in all these ways? Where our story is not the center of the universe anymore. Where we go from "am" to "is." Where we really experience that openness of love no matter what. When we see all the aggregates, which is the totality of our experience, really employing the metaphors the Buddha used for us to see the emptiness of it all, the insubstantiality of it all. To really practice this impermanence, non-clinging, non-agitation.

So how do we integrate all of this in the conventional reality of our lives? Because in conventional reality, there is a self and there is an "I"—that's how we operate, that's how we relate to one another.

I just want to read a teaching from a Tibetan master, Khenchen Gyalchen. He said, "We are not denying or

ignoring the label of 'I.' We are just questioning whether it exists independently. The Buddha himself used conventional language when he said things like, 'When I was in such and such a place, I did such and such things. This is my dharma teaching.' So the label of 'I' can be used conventionally."

We live in that world, and we use this language conventionally. But the self to which it refers does not exist in the way we perceive it. That's why we are said to be confused. Hard as we try, we cannot stabilize or establish as true that which does not exist. No matter how long we meditate, we will never see a self. We cherish ourselves so much that surely we would have seen it by now. Someone who will sacrifice anything to protect the self would have found it if it existed. But no one has seen a self exist in self. Grasping and cherishing that which does not exist is at the center of all suffering.

This is why it's so essential to this whole path of freedom. This is the essence of it.

So just to sum all this up, I'd like to quote a wonderful teaching from another Tibetan teacher. He said, "Is the self real? No—but it's not that you're not real. We all think we're real, and that's not wrong. But you think you're *really* real. You exaggerated."

That's the realization we have to come to. Yes, we're real, and we live our lives from that place. But can we understand that we're not really real? That we exaggerated.

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