

# Dharmette: Self and Not-Self

**Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on January 16, 2013**

I'd like to offer a few words about the issue of self and not-self in Buddhism. There can be a tendency among people, when they hear the Buddhist teaching about not-self, to interpret it as meaning to dismiss the self – that it's not important – or that any kind of self-concern or self-referencing is really not appropriate. That there is no self here to be concerned about, so you are supposed to just be something like a not-self, and have no desires. But in the world, when people have no desires, they are usually depressed rather than enlightened.

There is something very profound about the Buddhist teachings and insights into not-self. But it is not at all meant to be dismissive of you, as though you're not important. I would say that it's the opposite in Buddhism. Buddhism recognizes the tremendous value and importance of each person. To appreciate your own importance is part of the task of this practice. Who you are, and your well-being, are very important. You're an important person.

What is less known – because there is very little

mention of it – is the word self in the Pali tradition, ***atta***, which means someone who is developed. Someone who is spiritually mature is called a *mahā-atta*, a great self. Gandhi was called Mahatma, meaning a great self. Our well-being is important. The idea is to relate to ourselves as important and valuable, as opposed to relating to ourselves as if we don't count. In this tradition, everyone is important and valued.

The practice is meant to turn us towards ourselves with appreciation and value – even when we find ourselves feeling inadequate or bad. It is important to turn towards that, and to meet it with maturity, uprightness, and clarity as if we are important. As we turn toward ourselves as important, and if there is conceit, sooner or later we will know if we're caught up in a sense of self, or if we are attached to identity issues, and we will see very clearly how that limits us. If we really take ourselves as important, then we wouldn't be caught up in thoughts of being important. That concern just dissolves. It's like, if you only feel safe by putting on lots of armor, then you might be safe – but real safety is when you realize you don't have to wear the armor anymore, and you can relax, just be there.

To be able to create a sense of presence or attention, to be able to let go so that we don't even need a self-referencing point of view, then we don't need to have an identity that we're holding onto. We can have an

identity, but we don't hold on to anything. We are important, and it is important to pay attention to ourselves. This is the locus where you will discover your freedom, where the greatest maturity as a human being will arise.

There is an expression in Buddhism called the ***bodhimaṇḍa***, which is the place of enlightenment. When the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, that was his *bodhimaṇḍa*, his place of awakening. The teaching is that wherever you are is your *bodhimaṇḍa*. If you turn toward yourself as if you are important, if you do that well with mindfulness, then the need to be important will dissolve, just as the need for safety dissolves when you are feeling safe. The need to be an important person falls away when you relate to yourself as important, and you relax. You don't have to puff yourself up. You don't have to inflate yourself. You can just be.

I would like to suggest that, when you hear Buddhist teachings about not-self, those teachings are being offered in a context of tremendous respect for yourself and who you are, and a sense of the possibility of who you are. As we accept that, live by that, and have mindfulness practice, then any extra way in which we are caught up in self, or are conceited (positively or negatively), will begin to dissolve in time, because it won't be needed anymore; we see that this is all a limitation.

If you do hear the teachings that there is no self, you don't need to be confused about the self. You can be a self. Please be a self. And be a strong and upright self. Value yourself. Consider yourself as an efficacious person.

Use mindfulness practice with that attitude of being important and valuable to begin to shed all the extra ways of hanging on and getting attached to concepts of self, and all the extra ideas that we add on top of that. They aren't really needed. Eventually you will find that you will feel so important, that you don't have to think about it anymore, and you don't have to burden other people about being an important person. It doesn't matter to you anymore if people see you as important or not. Your sense of happiness is not dependent on being an important person for anybody, including for yourself. If you feel confident and relaxed about who you are, you just show up to be here.

In a sense, the teaching of not-self arises for people when they begin shedding all the unnecessary attachments around who they are. It is not meant to be a teaching to diminish us, or to leave us empty-handed in some way that makes us feel diminished, or feel like we can't show up, or stand there on our own two feet, upright, independent, clear, and confident.

This is not mentioned very much here in the West for a number of reasons, some of them sociological – maybe because of what happened here in the West in the sixties and seventies. Here, it is very rare that Western dharma teachers use the language of the warrior in talking about this practice. In the ancient world, still to this day, there is much more warrior language. The idea is that you enter the practice with the dignity of the ancient warriors: uprightness and strength – and you practice with that. You don't practice with being an amoeba, which just collapses into itself, or gets pushed around. You don't have to adopt the warrior language, but I offer it as a corrective to any kind of idea that not-self means you are supposed to be wishy-washy, or not quite here, or you don't count. It is the warrior who discovers that there is no self here.

Please consider yourself important, valuable – each and every one of you. And with all the voices and ideas that somehow diminish you or undermine that sense, turn toward them gently, kindly, respectfully, and question them. Let that part of you that can turn toward it and see it be your strength. Don't identify so strongly with the diminishing voices you have.

In summary, I think that Buddhism teaches that you are really important. Please remember that.