

# Oneself (2 of 5) Self-Understanding

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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This morning I will continue on the topic of oneself. Each person is the one responsible for their own practice. The Buddha said: “I only point the way. It is up to you to make the effort.” Our agency, our involvement, our engagement with practice is an important ingredient in walking the path of liberation. Classically, back in the ancient world, the Buddhist path was a path you walk on. This means we have to bring all of ourselves to the path. One of the important ways that we do this is by knowing ourselves and meeting ourselves. Knowing ourselves needs to be done with care.

I love the idea of hospitality: when we offer hospitality, it's an offering. It's a gift. It is something where we have agency and are doing it. We don't just stay in bed all day and play host to the people in our house. We are engaged in caring for them and serving them – whatever it takes, when we're the host. There is also a putting aside of our own desires – not completely, but in

being a host for other people, there is a deference, a letting go of self-concern to a healthy degree. It is very different when we're living alone. We just can do whatever we want, and we don't have to take anybody else into account.

We can be a host for ourselves. "The host within the host" is a saying in Zen. To be a host means to create a hospitable environment for oneself. To do that, we have agency – we have to engage in some way. One of the ways we have to engage is to show up – to be present. Another is that we also have to get out of the way. Our selfishness has no place when we're being a host for ourselves. If we're caught up in our desires, our wishes, the past, and the future, we can't really offer this hospitality to ourselves. There is no practice when we get lost in that world.

To have hospitality towards oneself is a kind of letting go of self-concern and self-preoccupation in order to meet what is here, to be the host for what's here. One of the crucial things to be the host for is self-understanding – to understand ourselves. We want the discovery and the understanding of ourselves to come from hospitality. In the process, we also learn to let go of selfishness. If you are selfish, you can't really be a host.

Self-understanding is aided by meditation and mindfulness, where we are awakening our capacity to be attentive to what's happening within us, what's happening here. Of course, the attentiveness is not limited to ourselves, but understanding oneself is often the seat, the beginning place in Buddhism and meditation.

What do we understand when we understand ourselves? We understand things unique to us that we are contributing to our lives – things we are doing that are healthy, and things that are unhealthy. For example, we begin to see how much we are distracted. All distractions involve some degree of attachment. If we can understand how attachment works and recognize it when it's there, and we play host to that, then what happens to our involvement with attachment? Chances are, if part of who we are is the host, that part is not involved with the attachment.

There begins to be space for the attachment. There begins to be some degree of non-involvement with it, and some degree of clarity – we see it for what it is. Perhaps we have the idea: “I don't believe in the attachment anymore. This is not where I want to be. These attachments are not where I want to put my life energy.”

This is not a critique of attachments or aversion to them. It is wisdom that comes from self-understanding – that this is not where we want to be. But we are the host, so there is more opening up and more letting go needed. To the degree to which attachment is closely connected to selfishness, self-preoccupation, and self-centeredness, as we let go of attachment, selfishness and self-centeredness fall away. Paradoxically, we become more self-aware, but less self-centered – more self-aware, but less bound by definitions of who we are, trying to prove who we are, or hold on to who we are.

So we begin looking for self-understanding, turning inward, and asking: How do desires work for me? When am I caught up in desires? How do aversions work for me? We try to understand them – how do I get caught in the grip of those? Do I spend a lot of time in stories? Do I live my life in stories? Do I live my life in opinions – in what's right and wrong? Do I live my life in judgments?

When we really see this, self-understanding leads to wisdom. One of the maybe unfortunate aspects of all this, is that wisdom comes from familiarity. A lot of wisdom comes from things we see over and over and over again. When we sit down to meditate, and we're mindful in our life, we see them over and over and over: "There's desire. I had no idea I was living in stories all this time. I had no idea that I was so judgmental – I'm

judging every little thing that goes on. I had no idea that I was living in a planning mind all the time. I had no idea that I was so self-referential in my thinking.”

By seeing these patterns over and over again, something begins to shift. We tend to be less mesmerized or enchanted with those thoughts and those activities. We start having wisdom: this is not the place to live. We have wisdom about not being committed to them, not being so interested anymore. Wisdom lets us see them clearly, and know an alternative.

The alternative that I’m suggesting today is to be the host, to be hospitable – to offer hospitality to the stranger – maybe even the parts about you that are strange. These could be your selfishness, your attachments, your story-making, your opinions, your self-righteousness, and your fears, but also what’s beautiful about you. “Here. Let’s hold that in a hospitable way.” We are not condoning it, or accepting it, as in, “Oh, this is good, and I have to just let it be,” but we are holding it in a way that makes space and opens up.

This is like when a stranger comes into your home on a cold rainy day, shivering. They pay no attention to you and are self-concerned with their coldness and wetness. As the host, you put them by the fire, you give

them a warm blanket, you bring them warm tea, and the stranger begins to relax and warm up. It turns out that, as they relax more, the stranger becomes a wonderful person.

It is the same way with what's difficult and challenging within us. We can know it, and have the self-understanding to recognize it – there it is – and know how to be the host, and how to hold it, not exactly in acceptance, but with hospitality, without conflict, so that it can relax. Perhaps all attachments, all selfishness and self-centeredness, all greed and hatred are just a stranger that needs the chance to relax, warm up, and thaw. When they relax and thaw, some of these things turn into something else, which may be a surprise.

So an important part of this Buddhist practice of ours is self-understanding. Yesterday, the topic was self-respect: to always meet ourselves with respect, to always cultivate respect. Part of cultivating respect is cultivating the ability to be a host – to have hospitality, to prioritize self-understanding over self-preoccupation, over spinning along with our attachments. This engenders respect: “Oh, I can see. I can understand. I can be the host here.”

As we have more respect, we can have a greater capacity to look at ourselves, to be present, to

understand, to be the host. That creates more respect, which supports a greater capacity to be present, to be fully here in a way that allows for greater understanding. At some point, self- understanding grows, so that in the self-understanding, the self part falls away. We just live mindfully and aware – with awareness and understanding available for wherever it's needed, whether that is within or without.

You are definitely worthy of hospitality. You're definitely worthy of understanding, and seeing, and knowing. Do it in the simplest possible way, without analysis and a lot of thinking. A lot of thinking about yourself is just more attachment. What we're talking about here is not thinking about ourselves, but more like almost a silent presence that sees and recognizes: "Oh, that's what's happening. I'm thinking a lot." When we are host to that, something about the thinking mind can relax and settle. Thank you. I look forward to sitting again tomorrow in silence with all of you and continuing with this topic.