

This is third in a series of dharma talks exploring the three characteristics of existence as the Buddha taught them: dukka, suffering, anicca, impermanence, and anatta, non-self. Two weeks ago we looked at how skillful working with suffering can actually led to well-being, last week we explored how a wise comprehension of impermanence can be a gateway to a sense of abundant enough-ness. Tonight we explore how experiencing the phenomenon of non-self can open our awareness to a direct and steady experience of our true nature. Next week the wise effort that guides our skillful works with all three characteristics.

Begin with the wisdom of the Taoist poet Lao Tzu

*We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.*

*We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.*

*We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.*

*We work with being,
but non-being is what we use.
-Lao-Tzu, Tao Te Ching
Translation by Stephen Mitchell*

Similarly, it is skillful and necessary to get a sense of personal self that is healthy, stable, open to learning and change, that experiences, embodies and expressed our true nature, our universal Buddha nature in our unique personal ways. And be able to use our mindful awareness to see clearly and accept fully the intrinsic emptiness of that ever-changing self, the ever unfolding being and becoming, and skillfully use the phenomena of non-being, non-self, to inform and transform that self into a vessel – a vehicle – for expressing our true nature.

We know that our mindfulness practice allows us to become exquisitely aware of all of the “contents” or constructs of our sense of self. We can become aware of any feeling as a feeling, any thought as a thought, any cascade of emotions as a cascade, any patterns of thoughts as a pattern. We become aware of an entire process of mind or states of mind as simply that - processes and states of mind. Even any beliefs or “truths” as beliefs we believe to be true. We become aware of entire belief systems, views, identities -- as belief systems, views, identities; stories we’ve told ourselves since we were five, or twelve, or since we got married, or since we got divorced, or since we became a CPA, or since we wished we had become a welder instead. All the while we remain anchored in the awareness that is noticing and observing these phenomena (anything that can be observed by the mind) as phenomena. And we notice that

these phenomena are constantly changing. But we see that the self itself is an ever-changing flow of patterns, none of which are “fixed” forever. As American architect, inventor, and futurist Buckminster Fuller said, “I seem to be a verb” is a more accurate description of our “self.”

With steady practice, mindfulness begins to penetrate the “substance” of our personal self, much as modern physics has been able to penetrate the “substance” of any material object. Modern physics has probed the reality of nature to discover there is far more space between atoms, and particles of atoms, than there is “stuff,” a vast spaciousness in the densest of matter, paralleling the vast spaciousness between the stars in the galaxies.

Similarly, the practice of mindfulness allows us to experience a similar spaciousness between the thoughts, judgments, and reactivities of our “self” and experience more of the flow, the possibility of shift among all the “stuff.” As the functioning of our brain shifts from an intentional focus on the “stuff” to a receptive awareness of the “space” between the stuff, we begin to experience a flow among the many “parts” that make up what we identify as our self. Instead of a self as a noun, an object with defined perimeters, we begin to see it as a verb, a process of continual change. We begin to get dis-entangled from the entire commentary about our self as self.

This awareness is often compared to a vast sky, open and spacious. Memories, plans, complaints float through like clouds, not disturbing the unchanging sky itself. There is a Zen teaching that says when our minds contract – with anxieties or complaints - it’s like looking at the sky through a pipe. If your mind contracts, getting caught up in a thought, or story, or emotion, return your awareness to your breathing. Becoming present to this moment, this breath, will clear your mind again, help you lay down the pipe, and open up again to spacious awareness and see the sky whole.

It is that awareness that can see that all thoughts come and go, all emotions and sensations of the body come and go, all contents, processes, states and traits of mental activity come and go. Awareness – the state of mind that “holds” all of that coming and going as coming and going - is itself not coming and going. Our awareness of that Awareness may come and go; certainly losing awareness of Awareness happens to most of us most of the time as we get caught up in the busy-ness of our days. But the Awareness itself is ever-present, always “there” to be re-discovered any time we choose to focus our attention and become present to it. With our personal practice of awareness, we “wake up” and create a moment of space to rest in the larger Awareness.

In both ancient and modern Buddhist teaching, there is no place in the brain that manufactures or locates the self; that’s true. There’s not just one specific structure like the anterior cingulate cortex that focuses attention. But brain structures do function together to construct a sense of personal self. That IS one of the functions of a maturing brain. Neuroscientists can see the structure of the brain light up as we focus attention. But just because we can’t yet measure the functioning of the self in fMRI scanners doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Neuroscientists can’t map consciousness or experiences of non-self either. We have no scientific idea of how the activity of the brain creates consciousness or non-self, no clue. That doesn’t mean it isn’t happening.

The “truth sense” of the experience is verified by millions of individual practitioners over thousands of years.

What we do know is that neuroscientists *have* begun to identify pathways and circuits in the brain that could explain this shift from focused attention that constructs the sense of personal self to the spacious openness that dissolves that sense of self, how we might shift from an awareness of self to an awareness of non-self. The circuit of focused attention is the one that we’re most familiar with – what Rick calls the medial (middle) network because[] The brain structures in this medial circuit are what allows us to focus attention on an object, on a task, that constructs and holds the sense of self together – our history, our personality, our identity, who we are and how we came to be who we are. That sense of self gelling into a stable (yet flexible!) coherence is utterly necessary to function and flourish as human beings.

A second circuit that we, and science, may be less familiar with – what I call the de-focusing network and Rick calls the lateral network because it operates on the sides of the brain - links neurons together in a less stable, more fluid way, creating in the brain what is called a mental “play space” where associations are more loosely held and more likely to re-connect with each other in new, unfamiliar ways.

When we feel stable and secure enough in the flow of ourselves, we can safely relax the mind’s grip on our self and shift into a mode of consciousness where the sense of self-ing temporarily “dissolves.” People do this fairly regularly in day dreams or in a reverie where our awareness can just “float.” We similarly “let go” when we relax and fall asleep at night or for a nap. Perhaps some of you experienced this letting go in the meditation we did last week to access a sense of the Unconditioned, the breathing out to infinity meditation.

It’s the brain’s de-focusing mode of processing that allows the state of reverie to arise. This state of reverie creates the conditions in the brain where, rather than occupying the brain’s processing with analysis and problem solving, the brain is “free” to meander and wander, to dream if we’re asleep, to play if we’re awake.

This de-focusing network operates especially on the right side of the brain. The processing of the right hemisphere allows us to perceive the world in a more holistic, big picture way and taps into our deep, intuitive knowing. The “facts” and “rules” of who we are and how we operate in the world loosen their grip a bit. Our awareness can be more diffuse, panoramic, can experience sense of non-self.

As you allow your brain to “let go” of the constant “constructing” of your sense of self, that we do through planning, remembering, worrying, comparing, you can relax into the awareness of simply being here, in this moment, in this place. Into a sense of “nowhere to go, nothing to do, no one to be.”

When we loosen our grip on the “stuff” of our “self,” we relax directly into an experience of openness, clarity, calm. As we let ourselves relax into a more open, spacious awareness (it helps to be trusting and curious!) the sense of self that we have so carefully crafted over the years and the strategies of that self that we developed to stay safe and strong in the world, begin to “let go.”

As we release a lot of the messages that shape our sense of who we are and how to behave in the world, we come into an experience of simply *being* that feels vast and timeless. With practice, this drop can happen within a breath or two. Even though we have penetrated through the layers of “stuff” to the space that holds the stuff, a kind of emptiness or no-thing-ness, the subjective experience is often more of an all embracing every-thing-ness, an abundant enough-ness. This new “object” of our awareness – *non-self* – is called true nature in the Buddhist tradition or presence or essence in other traditions. It is a universal phenomenon of being human.

This true nature feels like our true home. We feel centered, balanced, profoundly OK. We feel whole and complete. The qualities that people have universally identified as the expressions of this true nature – trust, equanimity, energy, integrity, generosity, etc., to name a few - are the qualities we come to recognize as our *true self*.

I once heard Elizabeth Lesser, founder of Omega Institute, describe this experience of discovering your true nature like wiping the soot off the outside of a lantern so that the light that was always there can shine through. We drop the obscurations of the conditioned personal self – good Buddhist terminology – and reveal the radiance of our true nature that is always there underneath. We can experience what poet Walt Whitman said,

*I am larger and better than I thought.
I did not think I held so much goodness.
- Walt Whitman*

It’s really important that when we drop into this experience of open spacious awareness and can access a direct experience of our true nature, we skillfully, compassionately, relate to the soot on the lantern known as the inner critic that may arise when we are not so carefully monitoring and managing it. This defocusing network does operate more actively on the right side of the brain. The memories of the innate negativity bias of the lower brain are carried in the right hemisphere of the brain. You don’t want opening to the spacious big picture, the wholeness of every-thing-ness to drop you into the negativity bias of the right hemisphere.

If your practice of the meditation below drops you into any kind of void or black hole, bring your awareness back to your own innate goodness. Evoke in your awareness a sense of compassion for yourself, for how difficult this practice of waking up to our true nature can be. Evoke wise understanding and compassion for how powerful these conditioned obscurations can be, return to a sense of loving kindness for yourself. When you feel stable in your awareness of your present moment experience, internally or externally, and reassured and comfortable to resume the practice, then it’s safe to try again.

As you allow your awareness to open further to an open field of Awareness, free of the limitations of any conditioning, you can open into an experience of the un-conditioned as we explored last week in the guided meditation of breathing out to infinity. In the spaciousness of this un-conditioned, a sense of non-self or simply being can arise. The power of this vast unconditioned consciousness is not as a philosophical concept but as an embodied experience. In the steady experience of spaciousness or form-less-ness, there is that phenomenon of

consciousness Dan Siegel referred to as a “plane of open possibilities.” Nothing is formed yet; anything can be imagined; anything can happen.

By focusing our awareness on Awareness, we are giving the brain something to do as we gently encourage it to do less and less. As awareness approaches non-doing, only being, the mind can come to rest in unconditioned awareness, only awareness happening. Focusing our attention on breathing in this exercise gives the brain an anchor in real time reality, even as everything else “disappears.” The brain seems quiet because “thing-ness” has fallen away. There is only being, and our awareness of being.

From here, we can experience directly our true nature, what the Buddha pointed to when he began every dharma talk with “Oh, you who are nobly born...”

We recognize the experience of our true nature as we experience the spontaneous arising of the universal qualities of the Brahma Viharas: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity. Or the Paramitas – there is overlap: generosity, integrity, allowing, wisdom, energy, patience, trustfulness, determination, loving kindness and equanimity.

We can intentionally cultivate all of these qualities of our true nature to help us arrive at these universal expressions of being, the everything-ness of our non-self. Next week we look at some of the practices of wise effort that help us embody and express our true nature. And we can use our awareness to open directly to the experience of letting go of self and simply being, then these are the qualities that arise.

It’s experiencing this sense of our true nature that then informs and transform our sense of our personal self. We begin to see ourselves as wise and caring, generous and equanimous, joyful and peaceful. Even, rather than I am wise, wisdom is flowing through me. Rather than I am joyful, joy is flowing through me. As our being becomes more grounded, more centered in the unconditioned true nature of who we truly are, whenever we lose our way, or become hijacked from an unresolved pocket of old trauma or befuddled by the unfamiliarity of the new territory we’re moving into, we can use our practices of mindfulness and compassion, of clear seeing and loving kindness to clear away the obscuration of the soot of all the layers of conditioning, to return to the home base of simply being in unconditioned loving presence or non-self. The more we become familiar with this sense of loving presence or non-self as our true “home,” the more quickly we can notice when we’re off and come back to center. Eventually we become so attuned to the state of our inner state and so facile in noticing and returning, we can notice and return in the space of a breath. We don’t have to seek a sense of innate goodness or non-self; it is what is experienced when the mind-brain is quiet, when everything else falls away.

Groups of 4 moments of non-self true nature, of self or other.

Closing meditation:

Wisdom tells me I am nothing.

Love tells me I am everything.

Between the two, my life flows.

-Sri Nisargadatta