

Self and Soul, I  
Joan Sutherland, Roshi  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas. It's good to be with you tonight.

I wanted to pick up on a thread from some of the things we were talking about toward the end of last year, beginning with that sense that the nature of human beings is to be fragmentary; that we're not so unitary and united, monolithic. We're kind of a collection of parts. So we have bodies, souls, spirits, hearts, minds, and a few other things I'm probably leaving out, and that mostly what we are is a loose confederation of all of those various parts. And on a good day that can feel like an interesting conversation that's going on, maybe a negotiation that's going on amongst all those parts. On a bad day that can feel like conflict and even civil war.

The idea is that perhaps that we are made up of these apparent parts might be a source of actually strength and creativity for us; that we're not a monologue, we're a conversation. And that conversation gives us a kind of flexibility, an ability to respond quickly, to improvise, and to draw on lots of different kinds of wisdom and information in navigating the world. And one thing I want to say about that that's important, I'm talking about parts but I'm really speaking metaphorically with that, because it's not as though we're like a map of Eastern Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with all the little pieces, you know, and different colors, all the countries up next to each other. Each of those things I named — body, soul, spirit, mind, heart, all of that — each is a viewpoint. It's a way of seeing the world. And that's all it is. So we are made up in some ways of all these different viewpoints, all these different ways of experiencing our lives and the world.

So, I want to talk over the next few times about two of those parts that seem crucial. The first is the Self, and the second is the Soul. And I'll talk about each one of them and also their relationship with each other, which is the most important thing. When I say 'self' that's a big word and means a lot of different things, so I want to be clear that what I'm what referring to now, in these talks, is the constructed self; what in some psychology would be called the ego; in some Zen would be called Small Mind; in some neuroscience would be called the interpreter or the autobiographical self. So it's the viewpoint that is telling the story of what's going on, that's

creating a linear narration of our lives. It's the voice in our heads. It's the thing that often we're referring to when we say 'I' or 'me'. We're referring to that constructed self.

When I speak of the 'soul' I'm not speaking in a Western religious sense of an entity that inhabits the body for a while and then goes onto another kind of something in the afterlife. And I'll speak more in depth later about what I mean about the soul, but basically I'm thinking of the soul these days as a kind of repository of all of our experiences. So I see it as this pool, and into this pool flow all these streams of life experience, karma, landscape, and all the things that come together to create this particular corner of the universe you think of as you. So the soul is a kind of organic record of the life we live without the story. I'll speak more about that later.

Okay, so to come back to the self. If we're talking about it in terms of the constructed self, the small mind, the ego, the interpreter, the autobiographical self, often we come to a room like this and endure forty-five minutes of meditation and a bad talk because we have this idea that there's a lot of problems located in that self, you know. There's difficulties and we want to try to fix that. And it seems to me that one of the shadows of spiritual practice can be the idea that we should annihilate that self, that we should have no self; that we take this zen term of 'no self' and we think that means there is no self, that it has to be destroyed.

Our way, as those of who you have been around for a while know, generally doesn't run towards annihilation and exclusion. It tends more toward inclusion and making things larger, so, simply, if something like the self is an apparent problem, rather than trying to get rid of it what we do is try to see more realistically the context of that self. We make the field bigger, so the self becomes smaller in proportion to everything else that we're including. And that's a more realistic view of things. This self isn't the be-all-and-end-all of everything. It really is in a big field. It really has a big context.

So, that's the direction I would go to begin to work with the self by bringing in the soul as another way of seeing this life. There is the self story about what this life is and what the world is, and there's the soul's experience of what this life is and what the world is. And they are two very, very different viewpoints, and when we include the soul's, all of a sudden the self's loses some of its inevitability — it's not the only game in town. It's not the only way of looking at things. So that's the way of including and of enlarging. Bring in more. Give the self its proper perspective and size, and then see what things look like from there.

Part of that I'm feeling a lot these days is I've become uncomfortable with this kind of conflicted relationship we have with the self, like the self is always a problem, it's all we ever talk about, as a problem. Whenever something becomes 'only something' I stop believing it, you know, that's a sign that like things have tilted. Because nothing is ever only one thing. And I find in myself a desire to discover a more generous relationship with the self, because if the problem with the self is that it is ragging all the time, you know, it's got judgment and story and opinion, and it's ragging on the world or it's ragging on you or it's, you know, rag, rag, rag, rag, rag. If that is the shorthand way of talking about the problem with the self, how is it a step forward to replace the self's ragging with ragging on the self? It's just replacing one ragging with another. I don't see the progress. I don't see the move forward.

To begin to find a more generous relationship with the self, let's think for a moment about why we have one. What's it for? What does it do? And it seems like the story we tell now which makes a certain kind of sense is that a sense of self, which is all science can say — science can't say *Here's your self. This is what it looks like and this is how much it weighs*. But it can say we have a sense of self. And the sense of self developed because it was good for our survival, because it was good for us to make it through the day if we had a kind of coherent sense of *I'm here and that's there and I'm going to still be here in 5 minutes*. So it makes sense to plan for that. We're not just in the thrall of *hungry, now must eat. Oh! We'll be hungry again tomorrow...what can I do to plan for that?* Those were the original jobs of the self. I wake up in the morning and I don't have to remake the world. I have a sense of continuity about what the world is and who I am. So that seems to have been the original purpose why a sense of self should have evolved, and there is something touching about this thing which steps forward and says "I will protect the organism. I will take on the survival of the organism. That is my job." There is something kind of noble about that.

And, then, what happened over time, and I am obviously grossly simplifying a lot, but what happened over time was the self got confused and began to see what it was doing to protect the organism as the thing itself to be protected. So the self's opinions, viewpoints, stories, skills, stores of knowledge, prejudices, paranoias, all of that stuff...instead of seeing those as the tools it was using to protect the organism, it saw it as the thing that needed protecting. It began to protect itself. So it is sort of like a politician who enters public life with a real sense of service in wanting to do good, and over time ends up believing that what the job is to get re-elected. So over time the self begins to feel like the job is just to get re-elected, you know, and to whatever's necessary, and

so instead of the sense of self serving the organism, protecting it, doing what it could for its survival, it now saw the organism is serving it. *The organism must survive so that I may go on having opinions, projections, judgments, and stories.* Right? So that seems to me to be the problem, that switch. But there is this kernel of goodness, the kernel of *I'll protect this creature. I'll do what's necessary for the continuance of this creature.* And so let's hold that thread about the self.

Once the switch gets made and the self is under the delusion that its job is to preserve itself and that the organism exists to help preserve it, there are a couple of problems that jump right out. And one is, here's the self making all of these critical decisions moment by moment by moment. If you have spent five minutes meditating you know that there is this self just [gesticulates grandly] moment by moment making all of these decisions about what's important, what matters, what the value of things is, what we ought to pay attention to, what we should hate, all of that stuff. And it's making it from this extremely limited viewpoint, because the viewpoint of the self is only what will get me re-elected. So you've got an aspect of the self in charge of a whole bunch, looking at things from this narrow, constricted, unrealistic (because narrow) viewpoint.

So, for example, let's say that the particular creature has had difficulties in intimate relationships. So the self is going to say *Okay, we've had difficulties with intimate relationships. Therefore, for survival, for my re-election, we will therefore avoid intimate relationships from now on, because we just don't want to rock the boat, we don't want to cause harm.* That's a very limited viewpoint. Just off the top of our heads, the body might have something different to say, the body might say *Yeah, but, you know, there's a lot of pleasure to give and receive. It might be worth the risk!* And the spirit, which is that part of ourselves that knows we're part of something much larger and feels connected to that, the spirit might say *Intimate relationships are a vast and mysterious thing, but even when they're difficult that vast and mysterious might really be worth something.*

So if we add in these other perspectives, these other viewpoints, suddenly the tight, narrow perspective of the self is part of it — it's not that it's not true; intimate relationships might be really dangerous for a particular organism — but you've got these other voices too saying *Yes, and there are other things that are true as well,* and suddenly the monologue is replaced by a conversation. And, again, the conversation is more realistic because it's including more of how things actually are, rather than excluding and limiting things to have the self would like you to believe they are.

So the first big problem with the self is this too-narrow vision, too-narrow viewpoint. The second really large problem with the self is, what it thinks its job is is impossible. So somewhere

along the line it decided that if it wanted to get re-elected, that meant that the world had to stay exactly as it was. So the self is in a constant struggle with change, with evolution, with loss, with the transience of things, the impermanence of things. And the self is always trying to either make or convince us that the world is stable, continuous, unchanging, it's going to be okay, and we're in control — this is not true. So, because it's not true, but that is the motivation and viewpoint of the self that it is pushing all the time, we are in, or at least the self is in a constant struggle with life for being life, a constant state of complaint at life for simply being the way life is and, in a constant stance towards life of disappointment and a sense of failure. It can't get this right. It can't do this. So there is disappointment and failure.

So those are the things we know that are problems about the self. And, if we want to find a more generous attitude toward it, as I was saying before, I think one of the things we can do is bring in another way of looking at the same thing, looking at the creature we call our selves. And, a completely different perspective is that of the soul.

So the soul is, in the way I'm speaking about it which is idiosyncratic, the soul is this collection of experience, this collection of this organism's experience in life and in the world. And, as I was saying before, all of these experiences kind of flow in and flow together. The nature of the soul is not to tell a story. In contradistinction to the self which wants to immediately line everything up in a story, put it in its place in the narrative, give it a value, and give it a meaning, most of all — this is what it *means* to you, this little event, this large event, the soul doesn't care about meaning and story. It's not linear. It works by juxtaposition and layering. Everything just sort of comes in and sits next to each other or on top of each other or around each other. And, what happened 2500 years ago; there's no such thing as 'what happened 2500 years ago'.

There's just this accumulation of experience, of karma, and it's very difficult to tell where the boundary between what we would call ourselves and the world is from the perspective of the soul, because the soul is made entirely of the world. So, the soul is kind of like this organic record of what this little corner of the universe looks like these days. This little corner of the universe I call my self for this however many four score and seven years. What the universe looks like right here and for this time, that's the soul. It's a very, very different way of looking at our lives, a very different way of understanding our relationship to the world. The self wants to come in and make order and meaning of the experiences that collect in the soul. The soul is not so interested in that.

As a result, the soul is often in the dark. We're often not consciously aware of it, but that doesn't mean it's not there and it doesn't mean it's not accessible.

So one of the things it seems to me that meditation and, in particular, koan introspection is about is finding that kind of access to the realm of the soul, the way things look from the soul's perspective. And, as soon as we do that, it begins to kind of naturally put space in the tight view that the self has, because it is such a different way, such a fluid way, such a less bordered and boundaried way of thinking about the creature we call ourselves.

So over the next little while I want to explore more about how we create a more generous attitude towards the self, how we access that view of the soul, how we access the way the soul has of seeing our lives and the world. And how the two might work together; how they might create a larger and truer sense of what it means to be human, and what they have to offer and say to each other.

So that's the plan coming up. For tonight I would welcome any comments or questions you might have.

Q1 : The way you're speaking, it's the first time I've heard you speak, and it's very fluid and very down to earth, and very much in relation to day-to-day life.

JIS : Thank you for your kind words.

Q1 : From who or what perspective does the soul get its little corner of the universe?

JIS : That's a good question. The way I see it at the moment is that there is this creature, which is the sum of all of these parts, and the creature looks with the eyes of the soul, not that the soul itself looks. So, again, it isn't like a place in us. It's a way of seeing, a way of experiencing. For example, when we look with the eyes of spirit, as I was saying, those are the moments we know we're connected to something really large and radiant, and we feel no separation. That's not the spirit looking, that's us the creature looking with the eyes of the spirit. So looking with the eyes of the soul is looking with an awareness of all of that experience without the story, before the story, before the valuing and making of meaning. The experience itself. Which is by its nature so connected to the world you can't really find that boundary, so it's the viewpoint that knows we're part of the world.

Q1 : So it's the part that sees your experiences before mind kicks in?

JIS : Mmm hmmm, before the self, the story kicks in. Yeah.

Q2: So, when we talk about the 'I' within the 'I', are we talking about soul and spirit, that particular combination? Or, just from this way of looking at things, how would you see that?

JIS: Yeah, I would say the 'I' within the 'I' is the 'I' of the creature as a whole looking through the particular eye of soul or spirit or body or heart. So there is a something that includes all of that, and then it sees in these different ways. Does that makes sense?

Q2 : So to spirit and soul you'd add body and heart?

JIS : Definitely. And mind. And other things, too. Probably. But yeah, I mean that's the point : we are made up of all of these viewpoints.

Q2 : And so the constructed self is...

JIS : One viewpoint. It's one viewpoint that's taken control.

Q2 : And it diminishes as we start to see things more through the other eyes?

JIS : Yeah, and if I were forced to give a sort of methodology about that, I think what happens is that when we include the other viewpoints and awarenesses...wow. The creature is much bigger than the viewpoint of the self. Wow. And the more that we become aware of that and include that and that becomes just a part of the field naturally, the field gets bigger, the self gets smaller in relationship to the field, but then something else happens, which is to be aware of that larger vision which includes all those various viewpoints. The particular viewpoint of the constructed self just becomes less interesting. We just want to spend less time there. There's other places to be that are cooler, you know? And so, there's a kind of natural shrinking of the constructed self, because we're not feeding it; we're not so interested in it. And then, you know, the hope is, the third step is the constructed self actually steps back into something like its genuine role, which is the survival of the organism, and leaves the field open for all these other viewpoints. But that we don't have to do that by destroying it because it's a kind of natural withdrawing of allegiance from that constricted space.

Q3 : So are you making a distinction between mind and all these other....

JIS : It's just a viewpoint. It's just another viewpoint.

Q3 : Mind is just another viewpoint.

JIS : Yes, all of this is just provisional, right, because it's words and we're trying to grapple with stuff that is tough to talk about in words. But in the way that I am speaking now, mind is just another viewpoint. Like the body has a viewpoint or the heart.

Q4 : Have you given any thought to which parts of the brain or the body might be activated by these different concepts, for example, the self I would think would be more in the prefrontal lobes, and your concept might be more in a primitive part of the brain, or even distributed through the body.

JIS : I think the soul is pretty distributed. You know, I don't want to get into phrenology, you know, the map of the Balkans at the time of WWI, because it doesn't seem quite like that to me. But, the body is kind of located, mostly, but we're not even sure about that. Like where does the body end? How far out does the body extend and our molecules go out, you know, let alone energetically or any other way. So I'm a little hesitant to map it like that, but in general the best biological correlation I've seen for that constructed self is what neuroscientists call 'the interpreter' or the 'autobiographical self' depending on the scientist, which seems to exist in the left brain, on the left side of the brain. And it's prefrontal, but it's got a lot of amygdala in it, too. It's got a lot of *gasp!* You know? And then, um, there was this beautiful conversation about the relationship between the amygdala and the stuff at the front of the brain, saying that like the amygdala has this super highway to the prefrontal cortex, so be very afraid, and the prefrontal cortex has all of these little narrow, windy back roads going back down to the amygdala, saying *It's okay, it's okay*. And that feels like the constructed self to me. Or, maybe, just another metaphor for the constructed self, the neuroscientific metaphor.

Q5 : Does the breath connect the viewpoints?

JIS : Yes. Sure. And, not only that, but the breath connects us to the world, because breathing isn't just an internal event. It's an event that by its nature is an exchange and connection with the world. So, it does that as well. It's like a physical re-enactment of that place where the soul connects with the world, and it is really difficult to see where the boundary is, just like it's difficult to see it in the breath.