

Self & Soul, II
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Good evening, bodhisattvas!

I was just in Tucson doing a retreat for our cousins there, Desert Rain Zen, and the timekeeper at one point gave these gorgeous walking meditation instructions where he said, "We walk as one body. Please be sure to keep up with the person behind you." [Laughter] Which I thought were the perfect koan way walking instructions.

We're in an extended conversation, these talks about the Self and the Soul, so I want to continue with that tonight, and I'm using 'self' and 'soul' each as a kind of short hand for things, because self and soul are obviously big words that can mean a lot of different things and different contexts, so what I mean when I say 'self' in the context of these talks is the constructed self, the self that in certain psychologies would be called the ego, in certain zen would be called the 'small mind', in neurology would be called that part of our neural circuitry that acts as the 'interpreter'. So, it's the part of us that provides a kind of continuity and is usually what we mean in ordinary circumstances when we say 'I' or 'me'. That's what we're pointing to.

The soul that I am speaking of isn't something that inhabits a body for a while and then goes on to an afterlife of some sort or another. I'm using a somewhat idiosyncratic but also rooted in Buddhist philosophy definition of the soul, which is, in contrast to the self — which tells the story of our lives and also makes meaning of the events of our lives — the soul is the repository of everything that happens to us, with us, through us, around us. It's just the accumulation of our experiences of life and the way we are affected by life and affect life. So, the simplest way of thinking about the soul is that it's that accumulation of energies and matter in a very local space that we think of as ourselves, which are a part of the universe. So it is that part of the universe in this little local space we call ourselves, and what it's like there. That's what the soul is. What it's like here in this little piece of the universe.

So the thing I want to focus on tonight is story and meaning, which are two of the great projects of the self : to tell a continuous story, to have a narrative of our lives, and who we are that's running constantly and being updated constantly by everything that happens, and is so

eager to let us know what's happening, and what it means. So, the meaning thing is really important. We were talking last time about how this self originally developed as a kind of way of protecting the organism, and that there's something quite noble about a part of us that steps forward and says *I'll protect the organism, and I'll do that by being vigilant, by paying....*

[lights go out in the temple]

Um, let's see, are there more candles around? Maybe we could just have one or two more.

This is the dark of the soul. [Laughter]

Well, I'll just carry on in the dark.

So if the self's job is to protect the organism and create a pattern so that when you wake up in the morning you don't have to recreate yourself and the world — you recognize yourself, you sort of have a sense of what happened yesterday and what's supposed to happen today, and the world isn't some completely bizarre, strange, alien thing — You kind of know that this is the floor and that's my car outside, and this is what the toothbrush is for, and all of that stuff, so far so good. And if the self were only doing that, probably there would be a lot fewer people in this room because not much of a problem. Where there can become a problem is that the self has decided that its job is not only to kind of keep this pattern and continuity going, it's also to evaluate everything. It's also to give a value and a meaning to everything. And, largely, almost overwhelmingly, the value that gets assigned to things is *What does this mean for me?* And that's from the largest to the smallest. So, initially, when the self was getting born and getting created, it was stuff like *Oh, distant campfire coming closer. Oh, my clan, sitting around the campfire. That's good. Or, bmmmm, saber tooth tiger sitting on the rock in a crouched position. That's bad.* So, there was this kind of evaluative sense that was very immediate and quite important.

But what happened over time was that that desire to make value about everything was spread everywhere and became part of everything, so it's like *Facial expression on friend. That's bad. Chance to go to the movies tonight. That's good.* And there's this sort of constant deciding whether things are good or bad at a level that is kind of overwhelming, boring, tiring, and depressive, or can be at times. So that's what sort of gets us into this room, is a desire to be liberated from that constant evaluation. And, I would say, that constant making of meaning.

The self is always trying to decide what things mean. It's always trying to fit it into the ongoing narrative, find its place, figure out how to line it up, and decide what it means for us. And, we tend to think of meaning as being pretty much a good thing. It's good to have a meaning in life. It's good to know the meanings of things. But even that making meaning can become tremendously oppressive because it creates a distance between ourselves and the thing we're deciding what the meaning is. We've in a way stopped listening to what's happening and we've taken a step back, and we're trying to decide what to decide, what the meaning is. Which is a different order of experience than just listening to the thing itself.

This is sort of the moment when I got the possible oppression of meaning. Many years ago a friend of mine said that she'd gone into the forest and bushwhacked across the hill and come home with a terrible, terrible case of poison oak. And she was wondering what that meant. And my immediate response was maybe it means don't bushwhack at this time of year. But she had a sense that there was some larger meaning that the universe was trying to impart to her. And, you know, the difficulties of that I think are sort of obvious. That when we're in that second order of experience rather than in the first order of experience of itch, itch, itch. So the alternative that I would suggest to making meaning about things is not a nihilistic 'nothing matters, it's meaningless, don't even bother'; rather, it's a refraining from making meaning so that the field stays open and alive, and there are many possible meanings present. We don't collapse around a particular story or a particular meaning. We leave the field open and leave the possibilities open, and that's quite different from saying nothing matters and nothing means anything.

So in contrast to the self's affinity for story and meaning, neither of exist in the soul. And let me be clear that I'm not talking geography here; I'm not talking like there's one part of you that's yourself and there's another part of you that's your soul. They are viewpoints. They are ways of seeing and experiencing your life, and if you are experiencing your life and understanding your life largely from the viewpoint of the self your life is going to look like one thing. It's going to look in a particular way. And I hope to make that really clear in a few minutes.

If you look at your life from the perspective of, from the viewpoint of the soul, things might look different, you might experience and understand them quite differently even though you're looking at the same events. In the soul there isn't meaning or story; there's just this accumulation of experience. And things just fall on each other and pile up and it isn't linear. Things are associated by juxtaposition and accumulation rather by a linear narrative telling you where things

fit together and what they mean. I think of it as a kind of pond or pool of water, and into that pool of water are constantly flowing all of these rivulets of experience, of sensation, of emotion and thought, of karma, landscape, politics, world events, and all of that. Flowing into this pool or pond, and accumulating and mixing, and creating this lightly shaped thing, which is the you that is the local experience of the universe of itself for this time, for these years, these moments.

There is actually a technical term for this in Buddhism which is the *alaya vijnana*, the storehouse consciousness. Underneath all the various ways we have of experiencing the world there is this great storehouse consciousness where everything eventually filters down, and falls like leaves in the autumn into this storehouse where it remains. So a kind of correlation can be made between what I'm talking about as the soul and what Buddhism thinks of as the storehouse consciousness, the *alaya vijnana*.

So what's it's like to experience your life from the perspective of the soul rather than the perspective of the self? What I'd like to do is actually see if we can do that right here and right now, pretty simply and quickly, because I think that will go a long ways further toward explaining what I'm talking about than my words. So are you willing to do a little experiment with me? Okay.

So the first thing is, here's the perspective of the self. Fill in the blank in this sentence : I had a blank childhood. Okay just pick an adjective. I had a something childhood. And just sit with that thought for a moment and notice what it feels like to think about *I had a something childhood*.

[Pause]

Okay, now let's walk a little ways in the direction of the soul. Drop the adjective out so that the thought is : I had a childhood. What's that like?

[Pause]

And now, let's wade into the pool of the soul. Here's the thought from the soul's perspective : There was a childhood. What's that like?

[Pause]

Okay. Does anyone want to speak to what you notice about the differences in those thoughts?

Q1 : It felt way more honest to say, like, there was a childhood rather than...it just felt way more spacious and real and accurate.

Q2 : It felt really incomplete the first round. To put an adjective to it felt really incomplete.

Q3 : For me, 'There was a childhood' was very amorphous, and nebulous.

JIS : Okay, and what was that like?

Q3 : It felt fine. It felt spacious. There were no details, no stories.

Q4 : I really liked 'There was a childhood' because I was much more distant from it and I felt freer, and a lot of time had passed. Like each time we did that, more time had passed. Lots more time.

Q5 : The first one felt really vivid, like there was a location literally. And then they got much more amorphous; it got bigger but with less detail.

Q6 : The one from the perspective of the storehouse, the childhood became like a footprint in the sand. The water just washes it away. Kind of an imprint that there was something.

Q7 : For the first one for me there was judgment. And then when you said I had a childhood with no adjective, it was still mine. And then with there was a childhood it didn't feel like mine any longer. It was an observation.

JIS : And what was that like?

Q7 : Oh, it was so much more space and relaxation and no judgment and, it felt more eternal than confined in a certain kind of place.

There's also something there...did anybody have the sense of that it's a way of making a connection with other human beings. There's a sense of *Oh. There was a childhood. That's something humans do. We have childhoods.* You know? And that's, there's something warm about that, and also spacious.

Q8 : I actually had a slight variation of that. I heard 'There was a childhood' and then there was this childhood, and other people with childhoods. And all of a sudden it was a much bigger picture that included each childhood. So it felt connected and much bigger, and intimate in a way.

Q9 : The last time, ‘There was a childhood’, it was funny fine to me to have a ‘There was’ because it placed it in a time narrative. So like, *Oh, childhood!*

JIS : That’s great. So that’s the koan move. So in the soul you rest in ‘There was a childhood’, and then when you bring the koan way to it, what happens is : *childhood!* Because you sink into the pool, and then you rise again from the pool with something. It’s something in the way of imagination.

Q10 : From where I am right now, experiencing a lot of death and honoring that, the ‘There was a childhood’ felt sad to me. Like it didn’t have a charge, but just sort of looking around the room and feeling for myself that there was one and it’s in the past. I guess relating to the time narrative.

JIS : So, something really important about the soul is, the poet Rilke said of the painter Cezanne that he really loved Cezanne’s paintings because Cezanne didn’t paint ‘I like this,’ he painted ‘Here it is.’ And when you move from the self to the soul you’re moving from ‘I like this’ or ‘I hate this’ to ‘Here it is.’ And that’s why the formulation ‘there was a’ or ‘there is a’. So the self says “I love the ocean.” There’s nothing wrong with that; that’s great. And the soul says, “There is love with the ocean here.” So the way the soul looks at our lives is to say *There is love of the ocean here. There was a childhood. The childhood is eternal.* There are these things here, now, for this time, rather than speaking about an ‘I’ who feels something, or is experiencing them in a certain way. Is that kind of clear? Okay.

Let’s do one more thing and then we will call it a night in the dark. One of the things about the soul is because there is no narrative line and there’s no pattern or organizing, a lot of it can feel as though it’s in the dark. Um, and in a sense it is, but it’s not a distant dark, it’s not a dark from which we are separated or can’t know. It’s a dark that’s really accessible to us. It’s kind of right here all the time, and it’s almost a matter of leaning back a little bit, and you can connect with that dark, and connect with what is held there all the time, and quite available to us. It’s just that mostly we’re looking with the eyes of the bright. And one of the things about including the perspective of the soul is about is also including the eyes of the dark. Can you see with the eyes of the bright and the eyes of the dark simultaneously?

This time, think back to something that happened today. It doesn’t have to be particularly important or have a big charge. It can just be something ordinary that happened today but that’s

sort of vivid. Like I'm thinking that this afternoon I laid down to take a nap and as I drifted to sleep I was thinking about this talk. Okay, so that's my moment. Think about it like that 'I', what I did. What you did.

[Pause]

Now look at that same event, the same very simple thing, from the perspective of the soul. So, 'there is'. There is a silk coverlet. There is translucent curtains glowing with the light reflected off the snow. There is the drip of snow melting off the roof. There is thoughts that get looser and wilder the closer to sleep they come, and then there is nothing.

[Pausing]

What's the difference between the 'I' perspective and the 'there is' perspective?

Q1 : There's a sense of pride associated with the 'I'. And there's the scary thing of letting it go at the same a liberating feeling.

Q2 : One's a story and the other one's a poem.

Q3 : There's a sense of amazement that comes from the second one that wasn't in the smallness of the first one.

Q4 : I chose for the 'I' one 'I was suffering'. And then with the 'there is' I didn't have to suffer.

JIS : So perhaps something you could do would be as you walk around in your daily life and when you catch the narration going on *Ugh. Long bank line. I hate standing in line. I've so many important things to do, and here I am....* When you notice that narration see if you can do it from the perspective of the soul, see if you can do it with 'there is' and see what difference that makes.

Okay? If you want to play with that, do. See how things shift from 'I' to 'there is'.

Anything that must be said before we close?

Okay, thank you.