

# *Self which is Not-Self*

by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

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*In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhadāsa gave regular lectures during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. Audio recordings are now available from [www.suanmokkh.org](http://www.suanmokkh.org) and [www.bia.or.th](http://www.bia.or.th). The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the volunteer and the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok ([suanmokkhhbkk@gmail.com](mailto:suanmokkhhbkk@gmail.com)).*

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In this lecture we would like to stress the matter of the ‘self which is not a self.’ We want to talk about this self that is not a self until it is possible for you to understand what this means.

This matter is the heart of Buddhism. All the teachings of Buddhism stress just this one truth that there is nothing anywhere to be found that can be attached to as a ‘self’ or as a ‘soul.’ This is the heart of all Buddhism: that there is nothing that we can properly cling to as a ‘self’ or a ‘soul.’ All Buddhism and all the Buddhist teachings stress and emphasize this one point. This is the one single teaching of Buddhism so you should be very careful to avoid the confusion of the university professors who say there are many kinds of Buddhism. There’s just one Buddhism and all Buddhism teaches this one thing. Don’t fall into the distinctions of Theravāda Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism or whatever because there’s really just one Buddhism and it teaches that there is no self; there is nothing that we can attach to as a ‘self.’

Some of you might have the idea that first will come to Thailand and study some Thai Buddhism and then will go to Burma and check out Burmese Buddhism and then maybe on to Sri Lanka and then India and then Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan. Some of us may be thinking that we can get a little of this Buddhism, a little of that and get different teachings, different kinds of Buddhism. This interests some people. Unfortunately this way of thinking – that

there are different kinds of Buddhism that we can find in different places); this is something impossible to achieve and it's also a terrible misunderstanding because there is only one true Buddhism; there's only one Buddhism, a single Buddhism and to cut it up into all these cultural pieces is a mistake. All of Buddhism is just teaching that there is no self; that there is nothing that we can cling to as a self and that we should get rid of, should clean up this illusion and confusion that we have about selfhood. Now in Sri Lanka they might have their ways of going about this, in Burma some different ways and in Thailand and in Zen. But what you find is the differences are only in the message or in some of the superficial activities but at the core, at the heart is all one Buddhism so we should be very careful to understand this heart of Buddhism and not get lost in the differences – the superficial things – and that heart of Buddhism is to get free of – to get rid of – that thing we call a 'self'; this illusion we have of a 'self.'

Maybe you've seen some of these big fat books they've got all over the place: *Buddhism in Thailand*, *Buddhism in Burma*, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, *Buddhism in Tibet*, *Buddhism in China*, now they've got it, *Buddhism in the West*. They've got all of these big fat books with lots of colored pictures to entertain people. All of this is just a lot of confusion, it's just a bunch of rind or skin or the outer coverings are bark, that they're talking about. Buddhism goes into Tibet and then mixes with Tibetan culture and Tibetan superstitions and then all of a sudden you end up with Buddhism in Tibet or it goes into Burma or China or wherever and mixes with the culture and the local superstitions and then you get Buddhism here, Buddhism there, just a lot of superficial distinctions. It's nothing important, nothing worth spending our time on: all this covering, all this rind or dried up dead bark. Instead we should get to the heart of Buddhism which is to give up, let go of this attachment to self, to selfhood, to our illusion of self, to get free of this attachment. You don't have to go and rely on one of these cultural forms of Buddhism. If you can free yourself of this attachment on your own, then fine. And even if you do it without the help of any kind of Buddhism then you've still got Buddhism right there, in that 'getting free of attachment.'

If you happen to have a bunch of those books we encourage you to go throw them away. They're not doing you much good. Instead just go and study. Instead of studying all these big, fat, heavy books just study how to let go of this attachment of self. That's the only thing we need to study. Excuse us if we use sometimes rather crude examples but you'd be much better off studying this dog here. Study this dog that's sitting right here and look and see how much of a

concept of self this dog has. Study right here; you don't have to look in any of those books and observe that if this dog doesn't have any concept of self, of I, of ego then it doesn't suffer at all; it experiences no misery whatsoever. This is something you ought to study very carefully and then compare it with us human beings and see how much of a concept of self we've got. See how much self concept the dog has and then see how much of a self concept you've got and then look and see who suffers the most; who's wiser: you or the dog? Who's the one that suffers? Take a look inside and see. This is what we ought to read and study; not all of those crazy books. Sometimes we even take the entire scriptures and throw them away because the only real book that can teach us is the one inside; the one that shows us when there is self and shows us the suffering, the misery, the pain of that self. This is where we need to study. Don't study dried up pieces of paper; instead study things that are alive; these things that have feelings, that experience pain and pleasure, happiness and suffering and study at this thing that can think, that comes up with concepts; study right here within our own heart. This is where you'll find the real Buddhism.

This dog here is named Grehyaa [?? 09.25] and it's trying to tell you something very important so please read and study very carefully what Grehyaa [??] is trying to tell you. He's trying to say that without a concept of 'self' there's no suffering or if there's only a small bit of a sense of self then there's only a little bit of *dukkha*. This is what he's trying to tell us if any of us stop to look and listen and study. This is what Buddhism's about: is getting free of this illusion of self. So this is the only thing we need to study. So study it right here in this life of ours. See with the dog: dogs don't think so much; they don't have all these concepts and ideas and opinions that we've got. So they either have no concept of self or little concept of self and so therefore they don't suffer at all or only a little bit but with us it's much different; we've got all kinds of ideas and opinions about the self, about ourselves and what's going to happen to ourselves and all this reading we do – all these books we read – it just gives us more ideas about the self and just puffs up our egos more and more. Instead of studying all these books and techniques and practices and ceremonies that just puff up ourselves; instead turn around and study life itself and find how to let the self shrink down, shrivel up and disappear. This is what the dog is trying to tell us if we would only stop and listen.

For example let's look at something very simple: take a finger. We've all got a few of them, take this finger here; it's just a bunch of flesh or meat or just elements; whether we want to talk about the elements of modern chemistry or

the traditional four elements. Whatever, here's the finger made up of elements and then take a knife which is made of metal, just some more elements and then within this finger there's some nerves; there's a part of the nervous system. So when the knife – this one group of elements – slices through the other group of elements the nervous system experiences that and it feels it as pain. Now when that happens how do you experience it? You experience it as merely some elements cutting through some elements or do you experience it as the knife cuts me. The knife cuts me. Which way does it seem to you?

The way we've been taught; the way we've learnt so far is that when the knife cuts in there that it's the knife cutting me; it's cutting 'me' and 'I' hurt and 'I am' gonna die, 'I'm' afraid 'I'm' gonna die; 'I' hurts so much it's killing 'me.' This is what we've learnt; this is how we've been taught; to see things in this way, to perceive it as 'myself,' this ego entity is being cut by the knife and threatened and all that. We're unable to see that it's merely some elements cutting into some other elements and that a certain experience arises with the nervous system which we can call pain. It's merely all it is. Certain theories of processes, actions and reactions, but we don't see it that way. We see it as 'I'; 'I' hurt, 'I'm' dying and so we suffer because this is how we fear. It's suffering that's all based in an illusion; this illusion of 'self' that we've been taught, that we've learnt, whatever. We have this solution and so we turn this into a terrible problem. What's really funny is that this self doesn't even exist; it's not real but that it has an incredibly real influence. The power of the self is real although the self isn't real and this influence is what we call 'suffering.' The influence, the power of the self is that it can make us suffer so tremendously.

Everything that's happening here is really just an interaction of elements. The knife are elements, the finger is elements and then there's the consciousness element that experiences what we call 'pain.' We're unable to see things as they truly are; we can't see the reality and so we have our distorted perspective and that's where this idea of self comes from, from our inability to see the way things actually are happening and so we see it as 'I,' the 'me'; the knife cuts 'me'; 'I' hurt and 'I' hate that knife and so on and so on. As soon as this idea of 'self' comes in then we have become stupid; not just a little bit stupid; it's one hundred percent stupidity; to perceive it as a self, myself that has been cut and that hurts and so forth, that is in pain but it doesn't always stop there. Our stupidity can even grow to two hundred or three hundred percent. When that knife has cut me and we see what is cut as a self, sometimes we even go and see the knife as a self. Have you ever done that; where you cut yourself with a knife and then get angry at the knife and throw it down and try and break it, maybe

kick it, cuss at it or who knows what. Our stupidity gets really carried away to the extent that we see the knife – just a bunch of physical elements . . . and we see the knife as a self and then do all kinds of silly things instead of seeing the knife as just elements, the finger is just elements, the mind is just elements.

Maybe you can remember back to childhood; an experience that's happened to all of us. Sometime in the past we were walking carelessly and we bumped into a chair and it hurts. We bumped into the chair and it hurts and we got angry at the chair that hurt me. The idea of 'self' came up into the silly little child's mind and then the angry child kicked the chair. We turned . . . This self was hurt by that self and we take the chair to be a self and kick it in great foolishness. In that child – which we've all been – there was this stupidity arising but it doesn't stop there because seeing a self here and there we start to see selves everywhere and then we turn everything into problems which bring on suffering. This is the situation we get ourselves into. We should look very carefully then and see to what extent; to what degree this 'self' is an illusion. If it's at the root of all this foolishness and all this pain we should look and see how illusory it is, how delusive it is and try and understand what is really going on here.

So when this kind of experience happens to the child where it gets angry and thinks that this other self – the chair – is endangering myself, what can we call this if we don't call it stupidity or call it ignorance? What else can we say about it? And it can even be worse than that. That same child could go and carelessly bump into this rock here and this hurts and then the child gets angry at this other self which is hurting me, which endangers me and then kicks the rock. How stupid is that? But, yes, this child goes and does that. We ought to examine this as carefully as we can in our own experience until we realize clearly that this sense of self comes from ignorance, from our misunderstanding, from our lack of knowledge. We are to look at it and see what would happen if we removed this concept of 'self,' what would happen if we were free of this concept of 'self'? This is something well worth our consideration.

We should be careful to understand that originally there is no sense of self, that in the instincts we can't find this concept of 'self,' however we might find a seed or a germ of this 'self' concept. When the infant is new-born it has no idea about self; the new-born infant doesn't have this illusion but because there's a seed there, a germ, look what can happen. Probably it begins: the first thing is when the child tastes mother's milk and then the experience of the milk on the tongue, the nervous system interprets that as delicious and then there arises the concept in the infant's mind 'I am delicious.' First there is just 'deliciousness' but then a sense of the one who is delicious, 'I'm delicious' and then self arises

in this way although it didn't originally exist. Or sometimes it works the other way: the infant sticks something in its mouth which the nervous system interprets as unpleasant or distasteful and then there's the thought 'I'm distasteful,' the concept 'I'm distasteful' arises. First there's just this sensory stimulus which gets interpreted in a positive or negative way and then the idea, the concept of self forms but that concept wasn't originally there. It only arises out of ignorance or lack of understanding.

Now next we'll come in and study this within ourselves. We'll look inside in order to discover a very profound truth. So profound that it's a secret that almost no-one will believe. This very important secret is that the deliciousness arises before the one, the self who is delicious. For example when there is some activity of the senses then that feels either pleasant or unpleasant. Lets say with this child and the milk, there's the sense of taste in operation and then there's a nice, agreeable, pleasant feeling. So there's a feeling of satisfaction and soon that satisfaction turns into the 'I am satisfied', the one who's satisfied, the satisfied one. First there arises the satisfaction and then there arises the sense of 'I' regarding that. Or it can be there's a pleasant feeling and then desire arises; desire for more of that pleasant feeling or distorts that pleasant feeling. First it feels good and then desire for it and then the one, the 'I who desires' arises. The I part, the self part, always comes last. First is the sense of pleasure and satisfaction and desire, then the one who desires the desirer. It always works like this. This is a very profound secret which probably goes against the way we normally look at things. We always think that I'm here from the very beginning but really I comes in later. This is explained in the very important teaching that teaches *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination). It begins with some sense activity: seeing, hearing, smelling and so forth and then that activity – the sense stimulus – is interpreted as either pleasant or unpleasant and then there is some kind of desire regarding that stimulus; a positive or a negative desire and then there's the desirer: the self starts to form after the desire arises. This is something that is crucial for us to observe within ourselves just as it happens right now.

We would like to stress; please allow us to stress as emphatically as we can the importance of this one fact which none of you believe. But please take this fact and go and analyze it carefully, scrutinize it carefully and then see what the consequences of it are. Once again this fact is that the desire arises before the desirer. The desirer – the one who desires – arises after the desire. First desire then the desirer. A very simple fact but nobody believes it. None of us operate our lives according to this fact. So please go and look into this, analyze it,

scrutinize it until you understand it, and if you can understand it then you'll understand what Buddhism is all about. This desirer just comes from ignorance; this attachment to desire; this clinging to desire, this craving is coming from our foolishness and then this craving, this desire, it's just a conditioned thing. Desire arises conditioned by certain other factors because of the sense activities, the nervous system, the pleasant feeling there arises desire. Desire is just a dependently caused thing; it's not an independent self-existing thing. It only happens dependent on other things. That's all it is but because we don't know what desire is we attach to it, we cling to it and taste and then we have the self, the desirer. Because of our ignorance; our lack of understanding of how first there is a sense activity and then feeling; it feels nice and then we desire. We don't [?? 28.38] we don't understand how desire arises and operates so then we attach to it. We cling and then there's the desirer, the self and from this attachment we've got this burden of ego and all the problems it brings. This is. . . if you can understand this point then you'll see that the desirer doesn't exist; it doesn't cause these things. We usually think that desire comes from the one who desires: I desire. But that illusion of desire comes later and if you can understand this it becomes very clear that the self, the attachment, is just an illusion, just a figment of our imaginations, of our crazy out of control thoughts. So please look into this .Study this process of feelings, conditioning, craving, and then craving becomes conditioning attachment, the sense of self. If you can understand this point then you won't have much difficulty controlling egoism, controlling selfishness and getting free of *dukkha*. But if you can understand this fact; this simple fact that first desire then the self that desires; the self comes later; the illusion of self comes afterwards. If you can't understand this fact then you probably don't have any chance of understanding Buddhism because this is the heart of Buddhism. So then we ask you to look at this within yourself in order that you can understand and see that first desire, then the desirer. Let us stress this over and over again until it becomes clear.

Now let's look at something closer to our own hearts. Let's look at love. We mean the love of lovers. The love of a man for a woman or a woman for a man. Lets look how this happens. It's the same as what we've just said: first there is love; then there arrives the lover. Somebody comes by and they're lovely, attractive, beautiful and then love arises and then that love, that emotion of love is attached to; that desire we call love is attached to and there is the lover, the self that loves comes in. See how it works? First love, then the lover. This lover is just another illusion coming from ignorance. In fact love itself is just a product of ignorance and then it produces the ignorant self: the lover. It begins with just the ignorance of seeing; seeing a sight or hearing sounds or whatever

and then seeing them, perceiving them, misperceiving them as lovely, attractive, beautiful, desirable, loveable and all that and then there arises this emotion of love, this desire of love, this craving and then that's attached to and then we have the lover. This is the very profound truth at the heart of Buddhism so it's very important that we should look at it. You probably don't believe this, you probably don't even like hearing it. Some of you want to get up and run away because you don't like hearing words like this. But whether you believe it or not, like it or not; we ask you to take a look at this very important principle of Dhamma because if you understand this principle you'll understand what attachment is, how it arises and how we can be free of attachment. So look and see that first love arises and then through attachment to that love there arises the lover. The lover is just the product of love, of desire. It's like attachment is the product of desire. So this we hope you can look at honestly and see the truth of what's being pointed to.

Actually, this truth we're talking about doesn't belong to Buddhism. It belongs to Nature; it's a natural truth. However the one who study and understand this truth we call Buddhist. This truth is an essential fact that a Buddhist must understand; just this one simple fact that love creates the lover; desire creates the desirer; not the other way around. Love creates the lover. The ignorant love creates the ignorant lover; the ignorant desire creates the ignorant desirer. We don't say that god creates us, we don't say this god creates these things otherwise we'd be saying it's a god of ignorance because this creation that's taking place is happening out of a lack of understanding, out of foolishness and so love creates the lover, desire creates the desirer. And so when desire creates attachment and then there's this self and when there's this self it leads to selfishness and with selfishness we act in all kinds of selfish ways. We act . . . we're greedy, we get angry, we hate, we fear, we worry, jealous, angry, all kinds of selfish activities. Everything goes wrong when we act selfishly; we oppress others; we harm others and so we bring great suffering into the world. So please remember this very important central teaching. It's called *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination). There's a sense object, some object of the senses and then a feeling arises of [?? 36.20] and then desire and then attachment. Remember these three stuff: feeling creates desire and desire creates attachment or feeling creates love and love creates the lover. Remember these three, memorize them and then go over and over and over again until you understand it and really see how it works. If you can do that then you'll understand all of Buddhism. You won't have to go all around the world reading all those heavy books, going to all those different meditation centers and doing retreats all over the place. Just understand right within your own heart how



feelings create desire and desire creates attachment. Then you'll know where attachment comes from, you'll know where the self comes from and then you'll be able to solve this problem, you'll be able to get rid of the self, chuck it away and be free if you can understand this one truth which doesn't belong to Buddhists but a Buddhist must come to know and understand this truth. It's just the same as in Christianity when they talk about the . . . where they have the cross, the cutting of the 'I,' the cutting of the 'self.' So a Christian ought to understand this too; how feeling creates love and love creates the lover and how all of this is coming from ignorance. Please look into this.

This, what we're talking about this truth here; you should see it as a truth of nature, see it as natural truth. It's not something limited to any one group or to any one place or time. It's a truth of nature. Within nature there are these human lives in context with the environment so there arises various sense experiences: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and then things happening within the mind as well. As soon as the mind makes contact with a sense object through one of the sense organs – through one of the sense doors – there arises a feeling; a feeling is created and then from regarding this feeling there arises desire and then attachment. This happens as a natural law, it's just a natural process that occurs according to natural law. Depending on the kind of object it has a different influence upon the nervous system and sometimes it's a pleasant feeling and sometimes unpleasant and then the pleasant feeling creates desire or love and the unpleasant feelings create hatred and then the desire creates the desirer and hate creates the hater. It's the one basic law. Sometimes it goes this way and this attachment and this self arises as the lover. And sometimes it goes this way: the same law but it ends up as the hater. This is the basic law that is at the heart of Dhamma, at the heart of Buddhism. Be very careful then about this law. This creator, this thing that creates love and then lover or hatred and the hater. The ignorant creates this kind of god, this creator god that creates this love and lover and hate and hatred. You want to worship this god or do you want to kill it? You have to be very careful about this creator god that creates the self that loves and that hates, the lover and the hater. About other kinds of gods we're not talking about right now; we're talking just about this creator god that creates attachments; this ignorant god that creates attachments. You are to look and see whether you want to worship it or kill it. This self that gets created which leads to selfishness and all kinds of problems in the world: you want to worship it or kill it? All of Buddhism teaches just this one truth; to point out to us how attachment arises and then to show us that this self needs to be killed and the way to kill this self is to kill that which creates it; kill that ignorant desire that creates the ignorant self. This is the one central truth of Buddhism. If

something says it's Buddhism; I don't care what book or censor or guru or teacher or whatever, if they're not teaching this one point: how to kill the self, then it's not real Buddhism. They may advertise Buddhism, Buddhist meditation or Buddhist this or that but if they're not teaching, if they're not helping us to learn how to kill the self then it's just imitation Buddhism, fake, artificial, fun and games Buddhism. So please be very careful to understand Buddhism, to find real Buddhism and to practice genuine Buddhism instead of some cheap imitation we have to understand this one central fact of nature. The fact is not Buddhist but a Buddhist – those who are trying to know and wake up – must understand this fact of nature. Desire creates the desirer, love creates the lover and hatred creates the hater. This is the natural truth that we all need to understand in order to destroy the self; destroy this burden of attachment that is eating away at our lives. We hope that you can give this your fullest attention, this most important matter of our lives and that you will be successful in getting rid of this stuff. So we'll end today's talk on this point.

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