

Christopher Titmuss
Week One, *Emptiness of Selfie Existence*
October 3, 2016
“Shedding Self-Help”



The theme for this talk with you today is the emptiness of “selfie” existence. Before beginning, I would just like to turn my mind’s eye back to the past for a moment and share with you a small story. From 1970 to 1976, I had the privilege of being a Buddhist monk in the Theravada tradition, and spent much of that time based in Thailand. During the years we passed in our monastery, the Insight Meditation Monastery, we started the day rather early, normally around 4 a.m., and went until ten in the evening. The teacher, Ajahn—that means teacher—Ajahn Dhammadhara, “power in the dharma,” he ran a rather strict monastery with much encouragement on practice and on silence.

Some years later in Bodh Gaya, where I taught annual retreats for some 40 years, he very kindly—this is more than 25 years ago—came and paid a visit. He found out that I, his follower, was writing books. He had a very strong and rather critical view about people who write books. He felt that books were a real distraction to practice, and practice, as he said repeatedly, absolutely took priority. When he found out that I had written a number of books, I have to say he wasn't particularly pleased with that. But we can take a different view and can use resources such as audio recordings, video recordings, and the written word as a real contribution towards insight and understanding. Any effective communication—whether it's a book, or a film, or an audio, or other means—will show in itself, in the loss of the grip of the ego, of the “selfie” existence. This insight contributes to freeing us up.

It's this particular theme that I'd like to explore with you in this talk. What do we mean when we speak of “selfie” existence? It exists in personal terms and in every day social language, but also woven into spiritual language. Let's first just take the self and its manifestation in our daily life. The idea of the self doesn't come from nothing, it doesn't come from nowhere—there is some kind of movement or activity that takes place inside in order for the idea of self to arise. That activity requires a variety of conditions. Feelings will be in the picture for sure, as well as memories, images, often intentionality

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there, tendencies, states of mind, stories, a history, physical makeup, biological makeup, DNA.

Put all of that together and when there is some movement and some contraction in all of that, there's a friction in the process. This friction in the process brings out in the being a sense of *I*, a sense of *me*, a sense of *my*. There is a grip in all of these, there is a restriction or a tightness in all of these, and it generates the sense of limitation, of contraction. There is some pressure, acknowledged or otherwise. A human being, a sentient being, looking at herself or himself takes an interest—that means brings mindfulness or awareness—to the dynamics of the inner process and is extremely mindful and vigilant about what the friction is, what it's about. What are the feelings, thoughts, memories, interpretation, views that are taking place? This is a critical point for human beings to find insight, to find wisdom, and very much to find a liberated way of being in the world. To put that in another way, it is to see the emptiness of selfie existence.

Then we ask ourselves, okay, what areas of one's life feed into that, accelerate that? This question needs to be asked with some regularity. There are plenty of times when there is the simple, clear, skillful, wise application of the language of “I” and “my,” which doesn't have any selfie-ness in it, any egotism in it, and it's important to recognize that. Right now, for example, you're probably sitting somewhere and just listening to a dharma teacher sharing some dharma with you. It's an activity that requires your presence, your attention, your mindfulness, and your description of your so-called self will be very simple, “I am just sitting here right now listening to and watching Christopher speaking and sharing some dharma.”

This statement, “I am sitting here just listening in this moment,” is a simple application of “I” as a shorthand of language. If we put it into a non-self language for the moment, the non-self language might be, “There is this process sitting here, it's referred to as heart, mind, and body, mindfulness is present, I am conscious of the speaker on film in front of

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me, and the languages of heart, mind, body, conscious, and mindfulness." That's a mouthful to have to say, so in simple language, it's "I am sitting here." The language of "I" and "my" doesn't have any inherent problem to it. It's a convenience, a skillful, helpful, convenience for human communication.

A quality of the human being is being able to distinguish—with exceptional perception here—between the occasions in life in which the language of "I" and "my" is appropriate, non-selfie, non-egotistical, and the times when "I" and "my" is infected, is corrupted, is under the unhealthy influence of history, of karma, of latent tendencies, of proclivity toward creating a friction inside of us. This is what I'm calling "selfie mindfulness." What are the ways and means to explore that, to see the emptiness of that?

Quite often in this world of construction, selfie mindfulness manifests itself quite often with the language of self. It may show itself as what I as "what I want," and there is a tension or a pressure in "what I want." The wanting, as a tension or pressure, will show itself in the relationship to the outcome. I may not as a human being notice the tension or the pressure in the wanting, but its confirmation will be on my relationship to the consequence of what I want. If in the consequence there's agitation, blame, negativity, fault-finding, or grasping on, "I've got it, I've got what I wanted," and the feeding into all of that, then the wanting had something problematic about it.

When there is the movement from the inner towards something which we wish for, which is healthy, and wholesome, and we're able to accommodate with clarity and peacefulness the outcome, whether it's wished for or not, then the relationship between the inner movement—the wished for, the determination—and the outcome is such that it doesn't have the capacity to make us feel depressed, to get us upset, and anxious, and agitated. Our exploration and practice is to acknowledge clarity at times of the use of "I" and "my," to acknowledge the clarity at the movement of the inner life toward the recognition that life is a movement with intention, with action, and the outcome and the capacity to

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be wise in the face of that movement. This is one of the priorities of the Buddha's teachings.

We look as well and we ask ourselves, in what ways does self-interest show itself? As I mentioned a few moments ago, I write books. Sometimes, perhaps at an airport or in a bookshop, I'll see one or two of my books. Sometimes I have to groan, as I see it in, of all places, the self-help section. It would be my wish to have a non-self help section, but bookshops are not quite ready for that.

There is a lot of connection and reinforcement around self-help, and this has a value to remind us to work on ourselves, but how easily this value can become the shadow. The Buddha doesn't give teachings of, “I take refuge in the self, I make my own problems, I am the creator of my own issues, the truth is inside of me.” It's “I take refuge in the Sangha.” What that means where there is an issue of self-arising, which is problematic. We need to explore within and appreciate and acknowledge—as you, and I, and others do—the contact with like-minded people who give us wisdom and support. That dynamic moves it out of the language of self-help, “I'll do it for myself, I'm the only one who can do it,” to a dynamic of the inner and the outer, recognizing the importance of the outer as much as the inner as a contribution to seeing the emptiness of selfie existence. That is a priority, it's a priority in the great discourse of mindfulness, of internal and external. Outer and inner matter equally, let's not forget that. Thank you.