

Rev. Dosung Yoo
“Teachings for Uncertain Times”
February 27, 2017



Hi. My name is Dosung Yoo, a Won Buddhist priest, and this talk is a part of the Tricycle series entitled “Teachings for Uncertain Times.”

Today I would like to talk about the meaning of enlightenment, why it is critically important for us to be free from suffering. Several Buddhist monks talked about what could be the most dreadful thing in this world. One monk said it might be a tiger. Another said it’s a poisonous snake. (Many monks practicing in the forest were hurt by them.) Another said it’s human desire. When they asked that to Shakyamuni Buddha, their teacher, he replied: “The most dreadful thing in this world is human ignorance.” Human ignorance is the ultimate cause of suffering.

When he said “ignorance” what does that specifically mean? Ignorance of what? It’s the ignorance of who we really are, our true self. Let’s think about what make us suffer: anger, disappointment, low self-esteem, frustration, *et cetera*. What can be the root cause?

Behind our anger or frustration, low self-esteem, judging, or comparing mind, *et cetera*, there lives our ego, our sense of self. Because of our ego or notion of selfhood, all kinds of attachment, desires, or wandering thoughts arise. Just like the earth revolves around the sun, our mind, our life revolves around “I, my, me,”—this is the ultimate cause of suffering.

They say to escape a trap we have to study the trap. Let’s investigate who we really are. With what do we identify ourselves? “I’m short.” “I’m smart.” “I’m an introvert.” “I’m Buddhist.” “I’m Christian, atheist.” We put so many things after “I am,” but we can roughly categorize them in this way. First, “I’m short,” “I’m sick,” “I’m tall, weak, strong,” *et cetera*. In this context “I” is related with our body. When you say “I’m smart,” “I’m lazy,” “I’m an introvert,” “I’m sad, afraid,” here the “I” is related with our mind. Third, when I say “I’m a teacher,” “I’m a daughter,” “I’m a doctor,” *et cetera*, in this context “I” means some position or some role in this society. Based on these our image is created, and to improve this image is the life force of our life, driving force of our life. But let’s investigate: *what is the real me?*

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[Even though we might] say “I’m a doctor” or “I’m a lawyer,” when we change our job we think we are the same person. It’s just an occupation or a job. We usually identify ourselves with our body and mind. What about our body? Each and every moment our bodies are constantly changing. So many cells are born and disappear in each and every second. What about our mind? Mind is just a concept for sensations, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness. Whether it’s our thoughts, emotions or our feelings, they exist just like a river or a stream. They arise depending on certain conditions and they are constantly disappearing. When you say “my mind” or “my body” we presuppose or believe there is some invisible entity where our mind and body belongs, but in order to know the reality of ourselves or our mind, let’s just think about the difference between concepts and reality.

Let me ask: “Does the vegetable exist?” Well, you can show carrots, radishes, green onions, et cetera, but what really exists is this particular vegetable—carrots, green onions, a radish. “Vegetable” is just a concept. Likewise, what really exist are our sensations, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness. Mind is just a concept. It’s just a notion.

So our sense of self that goes beyond our body and mind is just a fear illusion. It is just a mental construct, not the reality. Our sense of self or “I” is formed when our mental or physical aggregates are working together. Then in that way our ego, our notion of selfhood is created, but the truth is there is no permanent, unchanging, fixed entity called “I.” Our experience does not belong to anything. Do not describe this as actions without an actor, doings without a doer. This is a little intellectual explanation of no-self or *anatta* or *sunyata* or emptiness, which is the ultimate reality of all things.

Modern psychology tries to fix or improve our selves, our sense of self, in order to lessen our worries or [help us let go] of our desire, but as long as there is an ego it is not easy. We can alleviate our suffering by changing our external conditions, et cetera, but as long as there is a root of our ego the suffering is always there. Only when we see into the nature of our selves, the empty nature of our true self, we can be free from all suffering and distress. This is the

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characteristic or the essence of Buddhism. Buddhism is the translated word of the *pulyah*. These Chinese characters literally means “the teaching of enlightenment” or “the path to enlightenment,” so let’s ask again to ourselves this ultimate question. This is a very well-known koan or spiritual question: what face or what body did I have before my parents were born?