

2015-04-27 Letting Go of Mental Activity Doing Nothing

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SPEAKERS

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And now I'll just add to that announcement that the Friday Dharma practice day is going to focus on as the last of the series and the focus is that equanimity, the Brahma vihara, the divine abode, the form of love and Buddhism is recognized as a kind of form of equanimity. And there'll be a series of guided meditations and discussions and exercises around that topic.

So by the time I finish this talk this evening, you will probably understand that The less I say the better. And so let's see how many words it's takes to say that, like, explain that. So there's a time for action, and there's a time for no action at a time to do things. And there's a time for not doing. And it's probably fair to say that as a general as a generalization, that for most people, that they err on the side of doing and don't really understand very well aspect of non doing, especially the deep possibilities of non doing and that as people do this Buddhist practice, that at some point, it's important to learn about not doing anything and the less than the better Friday I went to San Quentin, and which I do every year or so. I bring a bunch of chaplaincy students that I'm training Buddhist chaplaincy to visit some programs in the prison there. And this year we went to visit a program that was called a guiding rage into power, which was taking 28 lifers, most of them. People who had most of them inmates who had murdered people. Some of them been in prison for over 30 years. And offering them the kind of inspired I think little bit from mindfulness practice by offering them a whole program to transform their anger, performance, transform their hurt to transform their aggression transform themselves. So they become peacemakers they become people can bring peace to the present and support other people making this transformation. And we were introduced to one of these 28 men who had gone through the program the year before. So it's a year long program. And he now returned to be trained to be a facilitator in the program to be trained. The goal of this program is for the inmates to be able to teach this program to themselves rather than bring volunteers in from the outside. And it seemed like it was I didn't quite get the year but seemed like we just earlier this year, just a little while ago. Something happened to this man. And that was he was sent to solitary confinement every 60 days, but he didn't know why. And he was very perplexed by why he was sent there. And later he discovered why he was sentenced to solitary confinement and there reason is that very strange, everyone who just suddenly quit and use your, your faith can change, you know, in a minute. And so no one else knew why he went to either. So here was this person who was facilitating training people to, you know, to wisely deal with anger to be a peacemaker and all that suddenly he wasn't the hole in the hole right and solitary confinement. So what he eventually found out was that what he knew he used to be part of a very notorious gang. One of the worst in California, I guess. And there was a rumor in the prison that members in the prison of that gang Former members were out to harm someone else in the prison. There's this kind of thing happens in

jails. But no one was named. There was no name associates just someone from that gang. We're from have been gang. So there's a certain logic that if you want to avoid that kind of violence, there's a certain logic. Let's take everyone who's known to be a member of that gang or have been a member of a gang and put them all in solitary confinement. Because then they can't do anything. So he suddenly found himself in solitary confinement. He didn't understand why. And he said he spent the first two weeks standing in his cell. He said, he said, firstly, you knew he was going to be told he was going to go there. I don't know if he's meant to say he was looking forward to it, but he might have been in solitary confinement in other prisons in California. Anything other prisons, it's really quiet. It's peaceful place. You know, nothing because you know, it's not much goes on there. But I was surprised in San Quentin.

It was crazy noisy. Everyone says, I guess there's a lot of people there and they're all screaming And yelling, and he was never any moment of peace in this place. Even though he was in his little cell by himself, you can hear everybody else. And so and he didn't know why he was there. So we spent the first two weeks. I said, standing in myself going over and over and over again. Why was he there? This is not fair. I've done everything I could have done all these programs. I've done this, you know, becoming a peacemaker in the prison. And it doesn't make any sense. And this is what's going on. And, you know, dealing with those around and around the clock, and it's kind of realized, well, I guess it's my you know, I have to keep dealing with the fact of my past that this is the consequences of my past this kind of stuff has to happen to me. But he two weeks he stood there and just his mind was spinning and spinning, thinking about this ruminating going over and over again. And then at after two weeks of doing this, he said wait a minute. Maybe there's another way and that's one of the advantages of being in prison for a long time is essentially you think there has to be a different way. And I've met at San Quentin people who were some of the worst of the worst. And it took them 15 years in jail, to kind of being the worst of the worst. That Wait a minute. I think there has to be another way. And then they get and then they find another way. And the people I've met people I tend to meet are really amazingly transformed people, beautiful people transformed and I wish people you know, that I know outside of the prisons were transformed to some of these inmates.

Was that the last one? Anyway, so that's for two weeks. He decided that he would maybe should try meditating. So he sat down to meditate and he was able to do for two minutes because of how chaotic it was in solitary confinement noisy and all that and all this maybe his mind in everything. He can only manage two minutes. But he kept it up. They kept coming back to it and he kept it a little bit each time you have trouble hearing out there. No, not too soft. Three, turn up the volume in the outer. Maybe it's not on out there. question here.

Is that better? So Is that better? Great. So he so he kept at it, you know, you're 60 days in the hole, you have a lot of time, nothing else is going on. And so he kept doing it and doing it the slowly you know, start two minutes and five minutes it kind of slowly over the days increased until he could sit, meditate for an hour at a time. He kept doing it, much of it, you know, that's what he did in prison was to meditate and he's kept it up and kept it up. And he said, at some point, he was able to sit, meditate, and he dropped into a stillness, everything became silent and still in his mind. And all this cacophony of the prison receded into the background. Didn't go away, just receded in his mind. And his mind completely still. He never had it before. But then he got excited. Oh, and he popped out of it. He said, You have to learn how to get excited. drop into this level of peace and stillness. And that's how he managed for himself in the hole. And it's in Quentin for 60 days for, you know, and a certain level of injustice, a certain level of unfairness, perhaps of someone who's following all the rules in the prison, living well going through programs changing himself, for no reason of his own no purpose being given more punishment by going into home. This idea of finally giving up the ruminations of the mind, the spinning

of the mind. And of course, I mean, of course, I mean, I imagine that some of you have a similar experience, where a year ago, going around and you have something that's you've gotten in your head and you're thinking about it reflecting on, maybe it's some resentment that you're holding in, review over and over and over again. Maybe it's, you know, thinking about plans and futures. See regrets or something that goes over and over and over again. And I think in ordinary outside of the prison outside of solitary confinement, there's a lot of interruptions in our thoughts streams. And so we don't quite notice sometimes how repetitive they are and how we're caught up in them. Because we, you know, you have to get out, you have to go to work, or you have to go do something. And so, but this man, you know, there was nothing interrupting him. Except, you know, because he was in the hole. And so, he kind of realized, wait a minute, it has to be different way. But sometimes it takes people outside of prison much longer, and they go, maybe this is not the way to do it. Maybe it's maybe I don't have to keep doing this kind of mental activity of spinning and wandering and being afraid or whatever it might be. And that's why some people come to meditation. And meditation can be it's multifaceted. tissue works on many different levels many different ways. It's not like meditation isn't like just one thing, entrepreneurs. One one thing. Certainly sometimes meditation is doing, we engage in certain practices that are beneficial and useful, we develop the mind. But sometimes what meditation is, is to stop to doing to do nothing. And at some point, as people get better meditation to develop themselves in meditation, there comes a time when that becomes really important to learn not to do anything. do less and less. And to learn, you're not just you know, you're sitting still in meditation. You know, you're not doing anything with your body particularly. And you've learned perhaps that to be relatively comfortable with not moving your body being able to hold still for 45 minutes or something. Not doing anything with the body. But then you start learning not to do anything with your mind to not review the past so much anymore. No, not at all. Do not plan the future to not talk about the regrets not planned revenge and not may have some fantasy going on and on some fantasy and all kinds of fantasies goes on that we live in whatever it might be, not perpetuate fear and to stop doing so the mind quiets down, and that doing quiets down.

And it's quite, it's quite lovely, more often than not, to have the mind quiet because a lot of the agitation stress we carry comes from the functioning of the mind, how we think and what we're concerned with, and our emotional drives and feelings that are there. And so as the mind gets quiet, it isn't just that our thoughts quiet down, but the emotional apparatus, the emotional processes, that are closely tied to thoughts also quiet down, especially the ones that are motions that could be characterized as being agitated, agitated emotions, feelings, and they quiet down, get quieter and quieter. And if you have some ability to get concentrated or be mindful and some ability to let go and discover and let the mind get really still and quiet, so there's almost no activity going on. I was not thinking almost anything. So just to take thoughts, for example. So finally you come to a place and you're relatively quiet for you calm and the ordinary agitations of the mind aren't operating. And then, you know, the train whistle blows and you're reminded that you know, you've often thought how nice would be these days in Amtrak vacation a train trip across the country. Go over the Rockies is supposed to be beautiful and you start thinking planning your vacations and you start thinking what a great to be vacation and how are you going to get the money and you have this problem at work. You watch this happen in your watch as it happens in the mind starts getting agitated, gets busy doing something has done many times before, and maybe captivated your attention many times before. Because of the nothing as much as going on in the mind. You see it beginning. And you recognize at that moment that it's for your betterment. To not be involved in that not do those thoughts, I can get involved in them. Why bother? Why get from a peaceful state to more agitated state? the activity of thinking about vacations and money for the vacation. You know, I can do that later. Why should I leave this kind of quiet, peaceful place? And you start seeing there's an opt there. It's optional. It's optional. It's a choice almost, whether to get involved in the more busy thoughts or not. And slowly what we can learn is how many states of

mine how many many ways the mind works are in fact, mental activities that are not needed all the time. And then you start questioning the mental activities they're doing Do I need to involve in those activities, and it gets fascinating, very interesting as you get more and more quiet. So here's a mental activity, that it's not needed. It's the mind that makes it happen makes it does it creates it. And nothing has to change in the external world. In order for this particular mental activity, to quiet down, and the evaluation of this mental activity has of the world disappears. And that's boredom. Nothing is inherently boring. Except that is a particular mental activity in the valley. That goes on in the mind that calls this a C's this evaluate situation or anything. This is boring. And if you've ever been around kids, you could know how debilitating boredom is. It's a real you know, and you kind of think, well, nothing's going on. That's why it's boring. But something is going on the activity of boredom. And it's an optional activity. The mind doesn't have to be bored. But the feeling of boredom for many people, it's inherent to the system. Its inherent, it's just like things are just it's just boring. Thank you. But it's, it's a particular neurons are firing in the brain, particular thought processes are going on. And if those don't have to be operating, the mind can get quiet feelings that somehow you are in inadequate person or feelings that you're like the best delusions or grander, whatever it might be our mental activities, angers and mental activity. Resentment is a mental activity. Basically anything going on in your mind is a mental activity.

It's pretty shocking or pretty challenging. To realize that your mouth what your mind is, is a mental activity or series of mental activities that don't have to be operating. So to sit and quiet the mind quiet the mental activity and not do anything with the mind just to just be and be able to discover a a reservoir pool of an ocean of peace. ocean of well being, of happiness, of contentment, of satisfaction that feels so good when the mind is not doing anything. The value of that is not so much it's good to have a calm, peaceful place. And I actually encourage you to not get detached or too focused on getting peaceful. Like that's the key aim is to get peaceful, but rather to get peaceful enough, still enough, so you can understand, to have a window to understand mental activity, what is mental activity to start seeing the mental activity, start up again, and see that it's optional. I don't have to do that. And that gives you a phenomenal leverage in your life. To simply understand, that's mental activity. And maybe in some circumstances, it's a very important mental activity and you choose To participate in and do it, it has to be done. But part of the radicalness of meditation practice is, it's meant to be one of the few places in human life where it's okay to do nothing. If you don't have to solve your problems, the chances are all your problems. The only way you have a problem, you know a problem or engage the problem is mental activity. And that mental activity is optional in meditation and can you put it down here, let it go to rest? Or do you carry or you keep perpetuating involved in doing doing doing more of it? And some of you I'm sure will think I'm not doing it. It's just like, you know, You know, there's no one at the driver seat but this car is going. Even minds going, but you know, and after all these Buddhists, they say there's no self, so I'm not doing it, he's just doing itself, right. And sometimes that's just an excuse to let it keep going. I'm not doing it, I'm just letting it be. Purchase Orders, you know, and to. So it's a really radical thing to do this is inside this perspective. Because to understand what is just understand mental activity is mental activity. is to it. It gives us gives you a different perspective to deal with what goes on in your life in your mind. You don't have to understand the mental activity. You don't have to justify it. You don't have to analyze it. You don't have to gets complicated, but what is it? And why should it be there? It needs to be there. In certain settings like meditation, you see it or just mental activity. So for example, you might think that you need to figure out the meaning of life soon. And you have these big existential issues. And maybe you should think maybe it's a good thing to think about that I want to disparage anything. Everything has its own time in place. But if you understand that wanting to discover the meaning of life is a mental activity, just a mental activity. Then maybe in meditation, just put it down and not forgotten how to do that. As opposed to solving it or figuring it out. You know that or If you're confused about what the meditation instructions are, what should I be doing here? confusion is the mental activity which may be needed. So rather than solving your confusion and

getting books out and reading about meditation, it's a could be a lot easier. And then oh, it's a mental activity to be confused.

And it's just a mental activity, the mind that's what the mind does, and like, maybe put it down or let go of it or not get so caught up so complicated with it. Just mental activity and rest. So the idea of doing nothing is a powerful teacher. We can learn so much about ourselves by doing nothing. One of the things we learn is how difficult it is to do nothing. And that's a useful thing to see. One of the things we learn is some of the strong force within us beliefs, thoughts, feelings that we have, that tells us that we, you know, no, it's not good enough to do nothing. I have to do, I have to do with something, something has to happen. Now I have to fix this problem, I have to figure this out, I have to have this happen, this happened. And maybe outside of meditation, maybe that's true. But this is where I think again, to repeat for meditation is so radical, such a radical teacher, because it can be the one place where you don't have to figure things out. You don't have to solve your problems. You don't to better yourself or anything. But you can learn something radically different, which is to learn to put the mind into a peaceful place. Do nothing. And then from that place, you get tremendous insight into the mental activity when it starts up. When all the mental activity is going all at once, a lot of mental activity going on. On, we don't see it as mental activity. We see it as whenever the thoughts, the fantasy, the beliefs, whatever's going on. And we're sometimes we're multitasking in there and the brain, right? That's just one thought. But you know, it's all these things going on. And so we're just caught up in the content, the thoughts, the ideas. And that's what some of these inmates at San Quentin are like for, you know, 30 years, 2015 years, 10 years before they realize has to be another way. part of the discussion on Friday from these inmates they were being taught as part of their program, the difference between original pain and secondary pain and, and say sometimes you don't shouldn't be dealing with your secondary pain should deal with your original pain because the secondary pain comes from the original pain if you take care of that and a secondary because and somebody with with great eloquence actually one of the One of the prisoners performed a so called spoken word poem. Beautiful kind of ultimate rap, like beautiful poem about this difference between his second theory painting the first paint and some of the talks about their crime they did, or you know how much it was really a secondary from the, you know, because they weren't dealing with original pain. And a few of them talked about the original pain. And this poem is beautiful poem was the abandonment of their father. And this poem he talked about, and he was five years old, and how parents were separated and how proud he was to have a father. And his father would come on the weekends to see him his father was an important guy, and you know, like all that my dad and we would do things together and like he was really he looked forward to so important. And then one weekend, he was waiting for his father to come. He didn't come He never came again until he was a teenager but then and that was his that was his original pain. So the second is that he's like mental, it's all mental activity. And it takes a lot of care, a lot of compassion, a lot of tenderness to become still and quiet enough with that kind of deep primary pay primary original pain. And to watch these guys in San Quentin, touch it and realize it to take responsibility for it and practice with it. And it gets still quiet. To meditate with them is great to met to meditate. Often you get to meditate with 2021 murderers in the room with you. touching them side by side. It was a powerful thing to see to be there. If you have enough time, you can learn to do nothing. It's not nothing to do nothing. It's not like invaluable, doing nothing. And this way that I'm talking about is, it's like, it is something boy. It's, I recommend it. It's really great but don't get excited. That's just more mental activity.

So I offer this talk to you as a little bit as a challenge for you to reconsider what you notice about your mind to reconsider what you notice about what goes on when you really pay attention to yourself and what your relationship is to your mental activity. And how you justify it, how you get pulled into it, how you get caught in it, how you ruminate in it, how you and not just your thoughts, but also some of your feelings that you have. emotions, you have the added attitudes you have None of those things are

inherent to the mind. None of those are necessary to always have in the mind. So to look at it, if you look at it or that if you get quiet enough just to be able to see it as just an outrageous mental activity. The just is not to dismiss it or disrespectful for it, but just sell it's mental activity. And there is another way, there is some another way of being. I don't have to be involved in mental activity, I can let it become still I can let it relax, I can let it rest. I can just be I want to do anything. Nothing to do. Nothing to do. That could be your mantra and see what happens. See what you're learning. See if it provides a very radical, useful perspective in which to see yourself in ways you've never seen yourself. The quieter the mind gets Still the mind gets more peaceful the mind is the more insight the more clarity you'll have of what's how your mind actually works. And that clarity translates to freedom translates to really not being audit on automatic pilot with at all. Learn how to be Wiseman at all. So that was a very long winded way of wanting to say maybe we should not do much. He shouldn't say much. Just be here, quiet. Maybe, you know, maybe in the next 10 minutes or 10 minutes before nine o'clock doing nothing. See what happens or what happened to you? How many of you are ready to bolt guy sneak out? Because you got to be kidding. sneak out.

So what questions do you have? What comments Would you like to ask about what I've said? clarification.

Hi, I am I I have a little trouble with the idea that you have a choice. I think sometimes you do on what you think. But I've experienced some uncomfortableness and anger, where this is taped, it goes on and on and on. And I try all kinds of techniques to get rid of it and this and that, including just observing it. And I had a tape that went on for a full year with someone I had a real problem with. And I did everything I could to stop that tape and it wasn't a choice. It just kept going on and on and on. And certainly there are times where you do have a choice where there isn't a lot of emotional charge, but there was a tremendous amount of emotional charge and I just couldn't get rid of it. And finally it just kind of burn itself out. So any comments you have on that?

I appreciate the comment, you know, mentioning that if that's offered, they offered me the case. But I don't find myself very interested in the question or the concern that as you raised it, so please do that. I say that respectfully for you. But I find myself much more interested in is the comment that you just a little bit troubled. I was kind of happy first that that's all it was a little bit of trouble, you know, means that you know, to have trouble in general just like a little thing, like, you know, little wrinkles still left in the sheet that you've been ironing. And so that's good to take care of the last little wrinkle. But what I find myself most interesting, if you haven't given this talk is not to address the issue that you raised, because that's not here and now here and now. here a little bit troubled. That's the mental activity that's going on for you. Are you able to see the value Here now of seeing that as a mental activity that you can put down that necessary to be involved in that.

Yeah, it's not a huge consideration right now. But I mean, I've just in the past what Mike what I was talking about, and it may happen again with some other ratio, but it just, I just couldn't control it. It just kept going on and on. And what I was saying what I'm trying to say is I did not have a choice. I don't, I'm not I'm hesitant to get into victim land here on this, but that's how I felt I just Yeah, I was, my mind was just running off with me and I couldn't control.

And I thought you were very appreciate how you said it. And you're very articulate, very clear. You said it twice now. But I said, I said, I'm not that interested in addressing your very good concern. Partly because of the theme of this talk, what I'm interested in generally what I'm interested in in this kind of Practice is here. And now what's happening now, which is happening, you know, which is today,

Monday night for you. And so what I, what I find myself most interested in is a here and now what's happening for you is you have a concern. That's a good concern.

Well, it's kind of a precautionary thing because of it happens again, you know, I'm just, I was a boy scout and our motto was be prepared. So I just want to get I just want to be prepared for anything happens in the future where my mind goes off and off and on. You know, right now it's in the last few months, it's been okay, but

it's completely reasonable what you're asking, it's great, I commend you for it. It's nice. And you're pointing in a different direction than what I was pointing to in the talk. So because of the just gave this talk, I'm interested in here and now what's happening right now. For you. And we can you keep talking about First of all, what's

happening right now is concerned for the future.

Great. Now Now we're talking. Concern about the future as a mental activity. Now. Can you put that down? Are you able to like, let go that's let the mind become peaceful. Are you kind of stuck on that stuck in that mode? Not particularly stuck

on it? No, it just just, it's just something that I think gotta be looked at. I mean, it's like, storing up food for the future, something that's a that's a sensible thing to do. putting money in the bank, you know, sort of along that line,

I completely agree with you is great, but you're saying and the talk today was to offer an other possibility. That's also useful at times, not saying this is the only way to respond. What you're doing is a reasonable thing for any human being to do and what you're asking. But, but it's not what the talk was about. And so I'm a little bit stickler right now. 32 he concern for the future storing up for the future taking care of yourself protecting yourself take into the future. So at times a great thing to do. But here Now does that have to does it have to happen right now?

Well, let's suppose that it was happening right now.

And then what happened if you just saw this mental activity?

Yeah, I tried that at the time but like I said, it didn't work.

Good luck. After that, no one's gonna be willing to ask anything.

given me what I meant, by the way, I responded, no one's gonna be willing to ask anything.

Ideal.

How does one strengthen one's practice to move this off the cushion?

stillness like this, or how does

one strengthen one's practice to move? These moments of stillness and the insight and the

clarity off the cushion?

Well, I think that what I said that it isn't it is stillness that's important to really in the long term. What's important is to whatever degree of stillness quiet, we have to learn from study become wise about how we lose that. So when we start getting agitated, get interested in that. Sometimes people who do a lot of meditation, are more interested in getting calm. And that's where they put their focus on. But when they come out of meditation, they don't give equal amount attention to what it's like to come out of meditation. And when they start getting more agitated, and I would like to encourage people to actually, it's maybe more important to be mindful of what happens as you leave meditation than when you go into meditation. So that's when you start to reappropriating your ideas, your feelings, your your motivations, your things you're concerned with. And there's something very significant by watching it return. You can sometimes see it in a much wiser way, see more, a better understanding of it. And the more you become self understanding of all these mental activities, how they work, how they do their tricks, how they cut into them, and get them involved in them. Then that translates into being wiser in daily life watching and seeing how this works in daily life you understand wiser about your see it come and you know how to operate with them. So that's one way. How does that sound?

Time for one more

quiet good. I hope it's a good sign everywhere

at various times, I find that it very easy to Do nothing and have my mind just like when I was sitting here My mind was absolutely quiet until I came to the place of wanting to voice this. And I caught used to call it when I worked with the elderly, the psychology of being versus doing. And I guess what I'm concerned about is when I seem to be able to spend a lot of a significant amount of time in just beingness being I end up afterwards feeling guilty, because our culture doesn't value it.

What's the what's the connection to in a culture that doesn't value it and you being guilty? Or does that what's the logic of that connection?

At the moment I don't have an answer, but

I just I guess for me when I've gone counter, I've been in cat counter-culture or someone asked me, What are you doing? And I'll say nothing. What are you thinking about? Nothing. It's

it's probably probably then the solution is don't don't offer that as the answer.

Figure out a different answer. That's honest. But you know, because it's just confusing for people. Most people don't understand about nothing and doing nothing and it's just confusing for them. So you add a compassion for them, come up with it come up with a different answer.

What we what would be your

where you could say, I'm just peaceful right now. I'm enjoying my peace right now. That's what's happening, for example, or I'm taking a vacation from my neurosis.

And then people people will applaud you. Oh, you got more often? How can I help? Great. Anyway, so I hope this talk is challenged you to essentially sit diverse. It's a very simple approach to practice. That is

apropos everywhere. Do you see it as his mental activity? And is the mental activity necessary? And in some settings like in meditation, it's many of the things we do are not necessary, and that's where your freedom can be found. Right. Enjoy. Thank you.