

Mindfulness of Breathing (67) Sacred Absence

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

absence, *virāga*, dispassion, *nirodha*, *rodha*, liberation, cessation, non-obstruction, inconstancy, river, flow, current, freedom, fading, ending, observing, obstructions, blockages, self-preoccupation

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We come to the fifteenth step of mindfulness of breathing, which is represented by the Pali word *nirodha*. The Pali word for the fourteenth step is *virāga*.

It is nice to use the Pali words because, in their original context in India, they have very rich connotations. *Virāga* and *nirodha* are sometimes listed almost as synonyms for liberation itself. They have a very good, almost sacred, quality. The English translations for *virāga* (fading away or dispassion) do not capture the richness of the associations or the way it feels in Pali.

It is the same with *nirodha*. *Nirodha* is such a rich word. In the original context, it feels like a heartwarming idea, which you do not get from the English translations. The most common translation for *nirodha* is “cessation.” For most of us, cessation is an end or ending. It does not bring up much heartfelt feeling, inspiration, delight or joy. Cessation is simply the ending of something.

The word *nirodha* comes from the prefix *ni*, which means “without,” “not” or “free from,” and *rodha*, which means “obstruction.” So *nirodha* means being “without obstruction.” The word “cessation” has a very different feeling than being free of obstruction. Maybe we can think of it as the cessation of obstructions, blockages, clinging, contraction – of what gets in the way of freedom.

The fourteenth step involves the fading away, ceasing, or ending of attachments, cravings, and conceits – compulsive ways of being that have a feeling of stress, and even pain, associated with their drive and presence. As the mind becomes more beautifully quiet and still in meditation, pain and stress become more and more apparent. They stand out in highlight as, “Wow, it is uncomfortable to feel this way.” In ordinary street consciousness, we might not feel it. We might even say: “What’s the big deal? It’s okay to have a little irritation.” But in deep meditation, irritation does not feel little. It feels like a real disruption and, more importantly, an obstruction to deeper peace and freedom.

The fifteenth step is that one trains observing *nirodha*:

One breathes in observing cessation.

One breathes out observing cessation.

One breathes in observing non-obstruction.

One breathes out observing non-obstruction.

In deep meditation, at some point, we observe a sacred absence of something. This absence is really strong, noteworthy, and deeply inspiring.

Watching inconstancy, we are watching things come and go. They arise and pass. We are in the river or flow of transiency. As we do this, attachment – reaching into the river of change – begins to give up, to relax. And something ceases, stops, or is no longer there to obstruct freedom.

Cessation, ending or absence is not just a temporary absence that fades and comes back a second or a minute later. It is very impactful for the mind and heart: “Wow! It is possible to really be free of cynicism. I’ve been cynical for decades. This is possible!” Or: “I’ve always been self-preoccupied. Wow! This preoccupation with me, myself, and mine has fallen away. I can look around – where is it? It’s absent. It has ceased. There is non-obstruction. Now I realize that self-preoccupation was a kind of obstruction or wind drag.”

Jealousy, doubt, hatred, resentment, desires, and fear are sometimes so embedded in the structure of how our mind works. And then: “Wow! It has ceased for now.” It might come back the next day or at the end of the meditation, but the thoroughness of the absence makes an impression: “Now I know this is possible. I had no

idea it was possible. This is like coming home. This is health. This is my birthright. This is worthwhile. This is fantastic!”

Any movement away from the sense of absence – any way of picking up compulsion – is a diminishment. “That’s not worth it anymore. That’s not the direction to go. That’s not the way I want to live. I want to live without obstructions and stress.”

When the sense of absence is impactful and strong – a very deep, thorough absence – a person will never be the same again. This absence is almost a living memory or presence that is a guide: “Oh, this is where freedom is. This is where peace is. This is where truth is – not propositional truth – but the true way of being.” And then it becomes an orientation for how to live our lives.

To put it another way, the Buddhist tradition says:

One then has entered into the current – the good current – the current that takes us to full freedom.

We are in the river of change – of transiency – but now we have discovered a place that is not in the eddies or the brambles growing on the side of the river. We have noticed a beautiful current in the center of the river. If we stay in the current, it will carry us, as the Buddhist tradition says, “to the ocean of liberation and freedom.”

I call this sacred absence. To recognize the value of absence. The importance of absence is a hard thing for many people to appreciate. In a sense, we can watch the mind and see that as soon as there is a quiet moment, the mind seems to reach out for the next thing to think about. Or we have problems, and as soon as one is solved, the mind goes to the next problem and the next. The mind is filling itself all the time. So to appreciate absence, cessation – a deep, sacred pause or stopping – and let it impact us: “Wow! It’s true that it is possible to be free.”

It’s a little disappointing for people who always want to have some *thing* that is reassuring – confirmation that they are important, valuable, and on the right track. Or they have a badge and can tell their friends, “Look, I have this beautiful thing or spiritual quality.”

Absence is not a badge you can put on. Absence is not the presence of some thing. Our ability to be present for things of the world becomes stronger, but freedom is not tangible. Freedom is not something that the mind can focus on as an object of attention in the usual way we can see, touch and feel things.

It is very easy to overlook absences or to diminish their importance. In fact, in the history of Buddhism in the ancient world, there were debates and big concerns about this. Some great Buddhist teachers could not understand how the ultimate goal – the ultimate freedom – of Buddhism could be represented as an absence. They posited a variety of transcendent states and experiences because the ultimate goal had to be a thing. However, whether this is true or not is beside the point of what I am trying to say.

The fifteenth step of mindfulness of breathing is observing absence, cessation, a space of non-obstruction. It is observing how the stopping, cessation, or fading away of passions, lust, clinging, and craving is so full. Sometimes it happens as a quantum shift. Poof – “Wow!” And sometimes it happens slowly as fading away.

Cynicism or doubt may have been plaguing us for a long time. And then: Boom! – “Wow!” We notice, “This is possible.” It *is* possible.

The Buddha made a great statement (I am paraphrasing him):

If it were not possible to bring an end to our unwholesome mental qualities, I would not teach you to bring them to an end. But it is possible to bring unwholesome mental qualities to an end, to cessation. And so I teach you that this is possible.

The fifteenth step is an encouragement to appreciate sacred absence. Take the time to recognize and appreciate when preoccupation – greed, anger, desire, lust, anything involving the mind or heart contracting – is not there. This appreciation will allow it to grow and for you to feel confident.

Keep making sacred space – sacred openness of attention – to be more present, more here. This will support the whole process of furthering the onward leading aspect of the path of practice. So:

Breathing in, observing cessation. Breathing out, observing cessation.

Thank you. May you appreciate all the absences that occur to you today. They will enliven, delight, benefit, open and free you. There are probably many more absences that are doors to step through than you realize. May you appreciate sacred absence today. Thank you.