

## Letting Go: What is Abandoned and What is Gained

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So for this Sunday morning talk, a little bit in the background or the foundation of the talk is the idea that the Dharma practice points to simplicity. It's a very simple thing, and it can be deceptively simple. It can be surprisingly simple what we're looking for when we're looking for the freedom from suffering, the alleviation of suffering. And that's at the heart of what the Dharma, the whole religiosity of the Buddha, is about. Part of the reason why it's useful to emphasize simplicity is that many people will come to Buddhism with all kinds of expectations about what a religion is, what they want, that is, searching for something that is, in a sense, outside of themselves. And there's nothing inherently wrong with that; it can be quite wonderful in itself to find a religious life or source that's outside of oneself.

But the Dharma of the Buddha is, in a sense, found within ourselves in this kind of very simple way. One characteristic or emphasis of this simplicity is the practice of letting go rather than acquiring more ideas, more concepts, building up ourselves and our conceit. There's a real emphasis on letting go, letting go, letting go. But letting go is—people make it more complicated than it needs to be, and sometimes react to it negatively because they think this means I've let go of all my possessions, or let go of the people I love in my life. In the teachings of the Buddha, the letting go is almost entirely, or maybe entirely, having to do with letting go of particular mental states or mental activity that's within ourselves, not letting go of things of the world. So the primary letting go is letting go of our clinging, letting go of the grasping or the craving that we have, the contractions that come along with some of the desires and aversions we have.

And so that's what we're letting go of. If we turn around and really look at ourselves deeply, we'll see, we'll feel that the clingings, the cravings we have, are a way of self-harm, the way that we are kind of hurting ourselves, causing pain and suffering to ourselves. In the Buddhist analysis, that's the suffering that we have the most ability to do something about—the

suffering that we contribute to through our clinging and our grasping. So that's what we're letting go. Now, when we let go, there are things that we abandon. We abandon clinging, craving, grasping.

We abandon hatred, aversion, hostility. And we abandon a certain confusion, tendency towards confusion or delusion. There are things we let go of. But these, again, are all internal things. There's not a search for something outside of ourselves. A search for God, a search for some kind of cosmic kind of understanding or wisdom or consciousness, is not a connection to something beyond ourselves, which is a wonderful thing that can happen, our sense of interconnectedness to life and all that. But that's not the heart of the Buddhist spirituality.

Which maybe seems very simplistic, reductionistic, and maybe not enough in the fullness of life. And that may be, but still, over and over again, the Buddha points to this simplicity of letting go of greed, hatred, and delusion. For the Buddha, that's the ultimate. To do that thoroughly, fully, is this full message that he is giving for people who have other ideas of what they want life to really be about. Then I think Buddhism contributes in that it says or offers that whatever your values are, whatever way you want to live and be connected, understand this life that we live in—even if you'd like to believe in God or cosmic consciousness, or your fundamental religious belief is the interconnectedness of life—all those ideas, what Buddhism has to offer is: please don't use those ideas as a justification for greed, hate, and delusion.

Don't focus on those so much that you lose touch with this deep inner potential: do not have greed, hate, and delusion. Let that be the foundation, and then you can do all kinds of other things in a much richer, more meaningful way. But for the Buddha, it was really just us, this inner life that we're rectifying or freeing, and then the rest of life comes in another way. So there is something we abandon, but the letting go is not just by what's abandoned. It's also by what is gained. And this probably is not emphasized enough in teachings of letting go.

Letting go is kind of, on the surface, can seem like, yes, we let go of something, and then at the best, when hands are open, we're open-hearted or open-minded, we're kind of left without clinging to something. But it's better than that: the letting go of clinging, grasping, craving, letting go of hatred and hostility, aversion, letting go of regrets and agitation, sloth, torpor, doubt—the letting go of all these things—we gain something as a result. It's kind of like there's been a dam that we're filled with water, and then the gate is opened, and the water begins to flow out, and it flows out, and fills the river below, and now just flows, and flows, and flows. It's a wonderful thing to have the water flowing, not bottled up by the dam. So the same thing, when we let go, something begins to flow, something begins to move through us

that maybe has been held back by the greed, delusion, by the clinging and grasping. There's the gain of what happens in that flow when something has been released and let go that was covering over or resisting or blocking something inside.

Then there's a number of things that open up when we let go and have cultivated awareness and presence. One of those things is the Seven Factors of Awakening. When we have a deep letting go, it frees up a certain kind of energy, frees up some certain momentum in our life. That makes available to us much more a mindfulness, a clear clearing, a distinguishing of phenomena, clear seeing, which we call investigation sometimes in English: effort, joy, tranquility, melody, and equanimity. These are not strange, foreign ideas to human beings. It doesn't take that much in reflection, maybe, to see that they accompany us to some degree, maybe in small degrees, here and there in our life, in ways that we don't really appreciate.

One of the examples the Buddha gave for this, and how these Seven Factors of Awakening can arise, is when one is listening to the Buddha at least giving a Dharma talk. If a great teacher gives a talk, and it's very engaging and compelling to really be present and listen closely and like what's being said, is so important, so clear, so profound, that we're really there to find out, what is this that's being said? There's a fullness of attention that is sutta's mindfulness—really there. It isn't that we're self-consciously mindful, but the attention is really present to take in this experience. Maybe even with all our faculties, not just cognitively with the mind, but with our hearts, our body, or all our senses. As the ordinary thinking, discursive, conversational mind quiets down, we're just taking something in with clarity.

There might still be some thinking involved, but the thinking is very simple and clear, that there's more clarity in the eyesight than the perception of things, and we see things much more clearly. I remember I went to very engaging talks, sometimes academic talks—as I took botany classes, and I was really absorbed in the details of botany class, and I would leave class and go out into the courtyard in this university where I went, and I would see everything so clearly. Everything sparkled and was clear and bright in a way that they hadn't been when I went in. There's something about cleaning the filters of our eyes, developing a clear seeing that comes with really being present and not distracted by our thoughts, and then listening to a good talk. There's some kind of aliveness and energy and alertness. I might even sit up a little straighter. All this is interesting. What's going on here?

And then there's also maybe some joy. Maybe you wouldn't call it joy at the time, but all the troubles fall away. All the preoccupations of life fall away. We're really right here, and it just feels so good and delightful to be with the experience. Also, listening to a Dharma talk may be very reassuring, a deep scouring of this max sense. This puts things into place. This is

the way forward. Something inside of us settles and gets peaceful and quiet. Then there's a gathering together of all the faculties. We're really here in a concentrated way, which means we're really present with all we have, focused on what's being said and what the meaning is, and perhaps also similar tranquillity.

It's so reassuring and so clear what's being said that now I understand there's an equanimity and a balance. Now I understand that there's no value in grasping on or pushing away or leaning forward or pulling back. There's value in just staying balanced and taking in the experience, being present for the experience without the usual reactivity with it. And there is the equanimity. So with letting go and the gate of the dam is opened, it's the water is the Seven Factors of Awakening. What's remarkable is that these can be seen almost as qualities or aspects of awareness itself. As we become more aware in an unobstructed way, it gets filled with these Seven Factors of Awakening.

The opposite of this, according to the Buddha, is the five hindrances: sensual desire, aversion, lethargy and resistance, agitation and regrets, and doubt. These have the opposite effect: the hindrances hinder, they obstruct, they cover over things. So it's like closing the gates of the dam, and then the water builds up pressure behind the dam. It blocks one thing. As we get—it's partly because with the hindrances, the focus of the mind is to be preoccupied with something, and we are preoccupied in a contracted and narrow and tight way, and so there's no room for the Seven Factors of Awakening to flow out into the awareness or be found in a clear form of awareness. So the Buddha talked about letting go of the five hindrances. It isn't just letting go of them that's important, but it's also how they create space or open the gate for the Seven Factors of Awakening to begin opening or appearing or flowing into our presence, into our awareness, and so we're gaining something as well.

So the letting go of greed, hate, and delusion—it's not just about what we abandon. It's also what we gain. In other teachings, the Buddha points to the four divine abodes, the four *brahma-vihāras*, as what starts flowing when the gate has been pulled away from the opened in a dam. There's *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā*, the Pāli words usually translated into English as loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy or sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These are beautiful qualities of heart, and they also are limited by our preoccupations. There's no room for love and care and compassion if we are caught up in things like desire, caught up in aversion, doubt, regrets, and so to abandon those, to release those. It isn't just a matter, isn't that we have then evoked this loving-kindness or compassion. There's something about the heart that has space now to breathe, breathing room for the heart that tends to then give birth to these beautiful qualities of heart. Now, there's space for them. And if

there's space for them, they flow.

So part of practice is to abandon, to let go, so that some of the best parts of our human life can flow and have a chance to be present. The simplicity of all this is that this is this core aspect of the Buddhist teachings. It's not exactly a religious teaching. It's not exactly, you know, my religion versus your religion. It's actually teaching something which just is, I'd like to think of it just practical psychology or practical spiritual practice that's available to anybody, regardless of what religion they are. There is a remarkable teaching from the ancient discourse that he points to this that I'd like to read from The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, The Book of Threes. I think it's discourse seventy-two.

So here a man comes to Ānanda, the Buddha's one of his chief disciples, and asks this question: Whose *Dhamma* is well expounded? *Dhamma* can be a word that's synonymous with religion in the ancient world. It means the teachings or religious doctrine or something like that. So whose religious doctrine is well expounded? The question one question on who in the world are practicing the right way, the good way? Who are those people who are practising, really practising the good way and the true way? Then question number three is: Who in the world are the fortunate ones?

So the Buddha then goes—Ānanda goes on and says that those who teach the abandoning of greed, hatred, and delusion are the ones who says this. What do you think? Is the *Dhamma* of those who teach the abandoning of greed, hate, and delusion well expounded or not? Or how do you take it? The person who is talking to Ānanda says, Well, the *Dhamma* of those who teach the abandoning of greed and delusion is well expounded. The religious teachings of those who teach the abandoning of greed, hate, and delusion—that's well taught. That's a good teaching.

And what do you think, Ānanda continues? Are those practising for the abandoning of lust, hatred, greed, hate, and delusion practising the good way in the world or not? How do you take it? Those practising for the abandoning of greed, hate, and delusion are practising the good way. And then are those who are practising or abandoning greed, hate, and delusion and really cut them out, really obliterating them to the end—are they the fortunate ones? The man says, Yes, those are the fortunate ones. So then what he says next is, Very nice. That's the household. Or the man who is asking questions for Ānanda says, It is astounding. It's a sing, Ānanda, that you have not extolled your own *Dhamma*, nor any denigration of the *Dhamma* of others, but just teaching the *Dhamma* in its own sphere.

So the Buddha, Ānanda, is not championing the Buddha's Dharma or dismissing the importance of other people's *Dhamma*, which is often what you get if someone says, What's the

best religious teaching in the world? Some people say, Mine is, of course. But rather, in saying something like that, Ānanda is just offering this principle idea about abandoning greed, hatred, and delusion, and then, rather than making any claim about how wonderful it is, he asks the person asking the question, Is this well expounded? Is this the good way? Are these the fortunate people, those who practice it? The man admits that that's the answer that I was looking for. So this simplicity of this inner look, and not looking outside, not looking for what's ultimate in a religious way maybe, not looking for metaphysical claims of truth, not looking for a deep understanding of the nature of the universe, the world, the cosmos, the beginning of time, the end of time—there's many answers that Buddhism doesn't answer. But rather, to the heart of it is the simplicity of looking within oneself and freeing oneself of forces which limit us, that block the flow, letting those on, and then letting something beautiful flow. That's their kind of life that's there waiting for us. Though it's not really there, it's not like a thing that exists independent of us. It's a thing that exists with opening up, with the freedom, with abandoning, with awareness set free.

So letting go both involves what is abandoned, but also what is gained. And so we gain, and then and ought. More often than not, what the Buddha talks about is we abandon greed, hatred, and delusion, and then we gain freedom. In some places, he adds a fourth thing that's abandoned. So there's four things, and this may be as helpful—the fourth one to keep in mind—so that we abandon the greed, hate, and delusion, and be sure to keep it really simple. The fourth thing to be abandoned is conceit: greed, hatred, delusion, and conceit. And then we really let go of conceit as well, then having abandoned greed, hate, and delusion won't give rise to conceit. Look how special I am. I have the most wonderful teachings. I have the most wonderful practice. I have the most wonderful attainment. I'm the most fortunate one. If making an "I" out of it and building up the self is also abandoned, this is also a delightful thing that opens the gates for what's wonderful in us to flow out. Conceit is one of those things that closes the gate, blocks the flow, in a sense.

So keeping it simple, appreciating the value of what we can let go of within—that which blocks us and limits us—and appreciating what's gained as we let go, and really feeling into that, and experiencing those gains. Maybe, in doing so, recognizing the Seven Factors of Awakening within us. Maybe recognizing them in a very small initial way, but slowly developing, having them, recognizing more and more, and giving space for them, and letting them really be a support for this life of freedom, a life that is free of clinging. So thank you very much, and may this week be one in which you discover the value, greater value, in letting go, in recognizing the Seven Factors of Awakening in your life.