

Dharmette: Doors of Liberation (2 of 5) The Signless

Gil Fronsdal

November 11, 2025

Keywords: three doors of liberation, signless, signification, assigning, anicca, liberation, craving, clinging, wishlessness, awakening

Hello and welcome to this second talk on the three doors of liberation. Yesterday was the introduction, and today we'll be talking about the first door, which usually in English is called the door of the signless, and a door where there's the absence of signs. Maybe to understand this, we have to appreciate that the English word "sign" can be used both as a noun and as a verb. We sign something, it means we gesture or we indicate something. Sign language is for deaf to speak with each other, to communicate with each other. It can be a verb.

In English, the word "sign" is mostly a verb. But if in the same way that a sign can be both a noun and a verb, if we can assume that "sign" can also be a verb and a noun, it means that we assign something, we project something, value on something, or purpose on something, or we select something. But in the Buddhist way, "sign" is the thing that we, the value we've assigned, the meaning we've assigned, the concept we've assigned on something, both the verb and the noun. Then we understand that a sign is something we're doing ourselves. We're assigning.

So something as ordinary as, you know, this bell, I assign this object, the concept of a bell. So that's the bell as the sign, is the assign, the signification that my mind makes for the bell. I've seen objects like this very much the same way that have been used for cooking pots or to hold a lot of pens, things that ordinarily, I remember seeing something like this, I mean, it was just almost like this, being used in downtown San Francisco by probably a homeless person as a begging bowl, asking for coins. I've seen objects like this that have been used as door stops. I've seen them as places that are filled with office supplies. I've seen things like this used in Asia as spittoons.

So we can assign different meanings to this, different purposes. We can assign different signs, signification to it. Some things are quite fluid and change over time. But still there's this

active way in which you are assigning. We can assume unconsciously or subconsciously as if this is really a bell. And we operate as if this is a bell.

There's no question about whether this is a bell or not. But in fact, what we don't see is the degree to which we're assigning bellness to this object. That's what we start seeing when the mind gets really quiet, still, very clear and mindful. We start seeing the role of the mind in assigning things and signification and how that's an activity in the mind that we can quiet and be still. For example, the stilling of the mind.

I could be sitting here, minding my own business, meditating, and start thinking about, wouldn't it be nice for me to make one of the childhood desserts that I had occasionally at home, Boston cream pie cake. I've never made a Boston cream pie cake from scratch. I shouldn't do it because I can't. I'm a very bad cake maker. I would probably burn it and end up with soup rather than a cake by how I would make a cake. I'm a really bad cake maker.

I start spinning this story about myself as a bad cake maker, which is easy enough to do, but I'm doing it during meditation. My mind is getting wrapped up and tight around, I'm signifying, I'm assigning to myself this label, those concepts. I'm a bad Boston pie cream cake maker. Luckily, I have some mindfulness. After a while, I recognize, wait a minute, Gil. This is really stressful.

I'm feeling my mind's getting all tight and a big knot around this idea of who I am as a cake maker. Boy, am I busy having cake-making thoughts. I'm supposed to be just sitting here quietly being with my breath. Why don't I switch? Let me relax this kind of fantasy of being a cake-maker. Let me just be with my breath.

That goes fine for a few cycles of breathing until I decide, well, actually, I'm a very good breather. I've been breathing for decades. My body can breathe well. I should probably get a Guinness world record for the most successful breathing that anybody, because it's been loud like my... And, you know, so I'm in the present moment, but now I'm assigning value to my breathing, to me. After a while, luckily, my mind says, wait a minute, Gil.

It's much more relaxed than thinking about cake, but you're still caught up in your ideas. Just relax. Just quiet the mind. Just be with the breathing. But it's hard to do, so I begin saying to myself, in as I breathe in, out as I breathe out. That just saying that keeps me there.

I can feel my in-breath as an in-breath. I can feel my out-breath as an out-breath. I'm assigning this idea of in, breathing in or breathing out. That's helpful. It gets me settled. I find myself settling more and more.

After a while, I notice that the assigning of the idea of an in-breath to an in-breath is extra. I've

been breathing much of my life just fine without the mind perceiving, assigning the concept idea of inhale to the inhale. I can feel that it's a little extra to keep assigning inhale to inhale, exhale to exhale. Why don't I quiet the mind even more? Let the mind become really still, really gentle, calm. Now I don't have to call this movement in my chest, my belly, anything.

I can just feel the ripple of different sensations that come into play, in what conventionally I can call the in-breath. But it's happening on its own, and I'm connected and following along. It doesn't have to be assigned any meaning, any purpose. There's no assigning of me as a good or a bad breather. There's no even assigning it this as an inhale. It's just a flow of sensations.

The same with what conventionally I call an exhale. It's just now that sensations have shifted in a different way. Then I'm starting to just settle into that flow and resting with it. There's less and less signification, less and less assigning concept, idea to the direct experience. There's just change. To really feel that change, there is a less and less orientation towards having any signification at all, any assigning, any signifying.

That is called having a mind, having attention, which doesn't make any signs, the signless. There's something about seeing the shifting, changing nature of sensations, perceptions, anything at all, that we realize that as soon as we assign signification, a sign, a concept, it's shifting and changing in such a way that it doesn't rest there. It's like watching the waves in the ocean, and I see a wave there coming, and I say, that's the wave. But even by the time my mind has said, that's the wave, that's the perfect wave, the wave has shifted and changing. The concept of wave, perfect wave, has, you know, I could hold on to it. It is the perfect wave, it was the perfect wave, I better always remember that wave, just because that was the perfect, and that my mind is caught again in the mind of thinking and conceiving.

By the time that even the idea, perfect wave has come up, the wave has changed. It's actually stressful, to be caught up in the idea of a perfect wave, it's more easeful just to rest the attention in the changing flow of those waves, not to signify, not to assign. For some people, when they are deeply settled, deeply calm, peaceful, and they're really in the flow of the wave, of the present moment, the present, the shifting, changing, the impermanent, the inconstant nature of the deep mind, how it experiences things when it's not putting an overlay of concepts on it, we see more and more how we do overlay ideas, how we do interpret, how we do assign meaning and purpose and all kinds of things, and that gets put to rest. Finally, it's so deeply at rest that the mind somehow just kind of finds itself absorbed in the flow of the arising and passing, the shifting, changing, the flow of change. It's kind of like someone who relaxes into the current of a gentle river, and finds they find, just finally, they find themselves

just perfectly at ease and at rest floating on the surface. So the current finally catches them and carries them along.

In the same way, there are doors of awakening. Some people have such a deep experience of change and permanence that the mind lets up, gives up its signifying activity, assigning signs, meaning, purpose, concepts to things. We go along with a current. We go with the grain. At some point the current catches us. Some point the door of the signless opens.

The portal opens. There's a deep, deep letting go, a deep kind of release that happens. That is not something we can do, but happens when we're deeply in harmony, deeply attuned and aligned with the flow of change, with just following along, not resisting it, but going with the grain of it all. For some people, when they really deeply experience inconsistency, *anicca*, the door to liberation for them is through the signless, giving up all signs, because it turns out that any craving, clinging attachment that we have does involve some signification, some movement of assigning a sign, right? and meaning, idea. To release that fully is one way to step through into liberation.

So that's the first of the three doors of liberation. It is said that different people will go through different doors. Just maybe based on their personality or circumstances, it's not so clear why. This is the first, and tomorrow we'll do the second, which is equally profound, but may be difficult to appreciate. The door of wishlessness. So thank you.