

Dharmette: Doors of Liberation (4 of 5) Emptiness

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So hello and welcome to this fourth talk on the doors of liberation. And today the topic is a third door, which is the door of emptiness. And for people who've been around Buddhism and Buddhist teachings for some time, it's recognized that there are... Sometimes emptiness is held up as a really a phenomenal religious state, phenomenal religious reality, truth, that is, you know, has almost like a sacred dimension or a very meaningful place in our life. And this is especially true in schools of Buddhism like Zen and Mahāyāna Buddhism, but also in Theravāda Buddhism and insight practice that we do here at IMC. And I did last week the whole topic for the whole week was emptiness, so it's been covered to some degree. But as a door of liberation... This is when emptiness functions as a portal to liberation.

Emptiness is kind of like a place where we can release fully, relax fully, let go fully. And where it's so fully where... We don't even want to say that we or I am relaxing fully or releasing fully, because the very subtle, subtle way in which I am the one who's a doer, doing something actually takes us out of alignment with this wondrous and wonderful experience of being alive, present, without self-preoccupation of any kind. And when I was 17, I was traveling through parts of Eastern Europe at that time, Communist Europe, kind of like in a Volkswagen van with four other friends. And we were kind of little commune on wheels. And I suppose it was 19... And I remember, and I was sitting in the back and looking out the window at very rural mountain areas, sparsely populated.

And I was kind of just meditatively, I guess, absorbed in the peacefulness of it, just looking out the window and driving along, nothing, no worries, no cares, no preoccupations, and absorbed into the landscape of it all. And then at some point, something happened in that absorbed and just landscape. I wasn't a doer of it, but just from one moment to the next, I kind of woke up. It was this sudden clarity of fullness of... It was like the clouds weren't...

it wasn't cloudy, it was beforehand, but it was like as if the clouds parted. And there was a whole different level of peace and clarity. And what led to that now in retrospect after looking back at it now, I was so absorbed into simplicity of just there, in the activity of what I was doing, just the scenery.

I completely had forgotten about myself. Completely, I was not, me, myself and mine was not part of the picture. They were just kind of, I was aligned with, in harmony with, attuned to the world around me without self-operating whatsoever. And in that state, something let go. And in that letting go, I was there. I was fully there. Then I came back in a certain way within seconds of that because it was so startlingly amazing to have this sudden experience of peace and clarity.

So this idea of the possibility of being fully engaged, fully present, and aligned with this place where selfing is not operating. Selfing has taken a vacation, where we've all self-preoccupation, all self-orientation, even the subtlest feelings of I'm the one who's being aware, I'm the one who's present. Any kind of coagulation, coalescing of energy around something we might call a self is dissolved. And we're aligned, we're in harmony with this kind of experience. And because this experience is empty of self, this profound sense of taking anything is... having substance as being mine or me or for me or against me, then something happens where the doors of emptiness open.

And because we're aligned with it, we can move into it, move through it, step in, fall into it, wake up into it, the door opens. Maybe the door is really, really large. And it's not that anything happens to us. It's just the doors open wide, wide, wide, and the light comes in. The clarity comes. Something different, very different happens. And so the door of liberation, and the key thing I wanted to emphasize is a few things.

It's not, this whole experience is not concerned with the philosophy of self, the metaphysics of self. Is there or is there not a self? That can be for other people to be concerned with. When you're doing meditation, you have much more interesting things to do than to be preoccupied about the, is there and is there not a self. What's the more better to do is to really be present for our direct experience, to know it, feel it fully. And if there is a feeling of self, a sensation of self, a concentration of some kind of energy around something we might feel as a self, that's worthy of attention.

That's worthy of being held gently, mindfully, because what we learn is that all coalescing concentrations, all gathering together of energy, all kind of orientations around self... is something which is a mental activity. It's not an existential reality. The way we experience it, the way we know it, the way it's constructed in the moment. And it's a marvelous thing

to have that go on vacation. It's a marvelous thing to put all that to rest, to let it dissolve, evaporate, and to start feeling and sensing that just to be alive is enough.

Just to be alive... and without that sense of self, without that self-preoccupation and concern. And not only just to be alive with that, there's a sense that we're, as we keep practicing, then we keep letting go, keep dissolving, keep getting clear and clear here, that something very profound inside of us is coming into a kind of a harmony with it, a kind of an alignment, a kind of a... kind of in the current of it. Now we're floating in that this is a home. We're at home in it. And we're not doing anything that ruffles the waters.

We're not doing anything that re-coagulates our experience. Everything can flow. Everything is settled. Everything is peaceful. And so there's a something inside begins feeling a deep trust. Right? Or maybe it's more realistic to say that slowly all the places of mistrust that we have, that sometimes the mistrust, the fear, is often the very thing, the reason why people protest the teachings of not-self. Because it seems frightening. They don't trust the idea of not being there, take care of themselves. Of course we should take care of ourselves, hopefully confidently. Right? But it doesn't mean that we have to always be holding on to that.

If you have a lifesaver that saves you in the water, and then you spend the rest of the time on land carrying the lifesaver, that's unnecessary. It might actually be a hindrance. So the idea is that at some point something dissolves, let's go. There's no more mistrust. There's no more fear. And as we kind of keep breathing, keep sitting, keep being present... and we become aligned with that which is clearly not self. And then, maybe, just maybe, at a time that's not your time, it's a time, a place, situation where you can't make it happen or predict it, maybe the door of emptiness opens for you. And that makes the world of difference.

So the emptiness... And so that's what I wanted to say today. And maybe because there's a couple of minutes left, I've been wanting to make an announcement, and so I'll do it now. And maybe it's also kind of a nice pairing of this topic of emptiness, which was first introduced to it in a strong way, in a meaningful way, in a very personal, experiential way for me, that was very impactful. When I did my Zen practice, and particularly my Zen practice at one of the three Zen centers, San Francisco Zen Center has three centers, one in Marin County called Green Gulch, Green Gulch Zen Center. And I'm going to be going back there to teach a two-week retreat in the end of March.

And it's one of the rare times that I'm going to teach as a full Zen retreat, a two-week Zen retreat. But the reason I want to tell you all is that it's going to be teaching about Zen practice, *shikantaza*, just sitting in the way they do in Zen, informed by insight practice. And to see what this insight practice that we have can really enhance and support the very essence of

Zen practice. And maybe a little bit, you got a taste today or this week about the sign list, the wish list, and the emptiness. And how insight practice leads to that in a similar way. It leads to this profound way that the Zen practice is lived. And anyway, so if you're interested in that, you can go to the San Francisco Zen Center's website, in particular for Green Gulch Farm, the center.

And it's a little bit hard to find it in the website there, but if you persist, or if you type in my name in the search, you might be as easy as to find it. And it is a Zen retreat that will be maybe held in a softer way than Zen is usually held and presented. Kind of a blending of some of the ways we are at Insight Retreat Center and some of the ways we can be in Zen practice. And in the middle of those two weeks, there'll be a five-day Zen *seshin*, which is more of an even more intense kind of dipping into the whole world of Zen practice. So thank you very much. And so we have one more talk tomorrow to finish on this three doors of liberation. Thank you.