

Tuesday Dharma talk

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As was talked about, the end of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* concerns insight into the four liberating insights. There is suffering. There is the arising of suffering. There is the cessation of suffering, and knowing that this is the way to the cessation of suffering.

And the word cessation is *nibbāna*. And what's interesting about that word is that the *ni* means absence, without, and *rodha* means obstruction. No obstructions. You get a very different feeling if you simply say cessation, which just means the ending of something. But implied in the word is the ending of something, but it's also the giving of something.

It's the giving of the clear space, an opening where what was an obstruction before is no longer there. And what is it that is there? What is it that can come through when that obstruction is no longer there? I'd like to say that it's you. You in a different way than maybe the old you.

Could it be that many of us have lived for years with the weight of obstructions, things that are in our way that don't have to be there, but they are there? And it's possible for them to step aside, to fall away, to end, to cease. And that cessation is not—the blank is not—nothing that's of any value.

There's a beautiful, I think beautiful, nice analogy, metaphor, that's central to the *Dharma*: that of a path. And a path in the woods, a path in the jungle, is some place within that has no obstructions, that you can walk freely through. The deep experience of liberation in *Theravāda* Buddhism is sometimes described as attaining the path and obtaining the fruit. And one way of understanding that is that attaining the path means the obstructions are gone; your way forward is there.

And what's the fruit? Going forward from there, free—free of the obstructions, free of the things that weigh us down, block us, get in the way. Things that get in the way of our freedom are also considered to be synonymous with what causes suffering. And so, the end of suffering is also the end of something which has weighed us down, gotten in our way, and made life harder.

So, to emphasize the freedom, the lack of barriers, lack of hindrances, is built into this word *nibbāna*. And so, do we keep that in mind when, over and over and over again, we find the Buddha describing awakening, the kind of goal of this practice, with the idea of absence of something? It's the absence of greed, hate, and delusion.

You go to your block party and you say, "You know, what's your religion teach you?" "Oh, the absence of greed, hate, and delusion." "And that's boring," your neighbors say. "You know, don't you have anything better to show than that? I mean, in my religion, we have oneness with cosmic consciousness and bliss, and everything is like fireworks and it's like Disneyland, and that's what spirituality is. You know, we have a good time. All you have is the end of greed, hate, and delusion. I mean, I know you guys are called the Little Vehicle, but I guess so."

But one of the reasons why I think it's very profound not to emphasize what is dropped, what just gets out of the way, is that as soon as you say that the goal of a spiritual life is something, it gets in the way. It becomes something to focus on, to attain, to have, to prove, to show off with. When you can't really show off that absence: "Look at me. What do you attain?" "Oh, well, you know, you can't see it."

"So, you know, I'm sorry to hear that. You can't see it. Where do you find it?" "Well, it's not findable. It's not a thing you can find." "Oh, I mean, your reputation at your block party is going to go down quickly."

An absence of suffering, absence of clinging, absence of attachments. Which, if you're really paying attention, you feel that they're obstructions. They weigh us down. They slow us down. They keep us spinning and going.

One or two of you, I think, maybe accidentally, have discovered how crazy the mind is—the thinking mind—and how freely it spins and goes. And maybe it kind of intuitively occurred to maybe one or two of you that maybe that isn't really the best thing to spend your time doing, and that it doesn't really serve you. It doesn't really bring you freedom, joy, well-being. It actually keeps you kind of weighed down, or keeps you from yourself, even sometimes.

These crazy thoughts that we spin and live in, that a day or two later you don't even remember.

And so, just for the sake of the block party, you could call it sacred absence. We live in a sacred absence—the absence of clinging, the absence of being caught. The absence of something profound within us from being obstructed.

And you see that in this tradition, if you read the *suttas* carefully, there is in fact a lot of emphasis on these terrible things of letting go, abandoning. Sometimes the language gets a little bit more dramatic: destroying. So, some people think that's a party-pooper religion, that it's such a negative religion. It looks upon things so negatively.

But what they don't recognize is that the Buddha is always very specific about what to let go of, what to abandon, what to destroy. And I love this passage where he says—he says it many different ways for different things—but he says something like, in relationship to renunciation specifically, “If renunciation increases what's unwholesome in you and decreases the wholesome, I do not tell you to renounce that. But if renunciation increases the wholesome and decreases the unwholesome, I say let go of that, renounce that.”

That's a very different feeling than just that Buddhism is all about renouncing, renouncing, and renouncing. Buddhism is all about wisdom, seeing clearly, understanding. Some things harm us. Some things obstruct us.

And if we clearly see that they're harming us, let go of that. But if it benefits us, if it's wholesome, the Buddha wants us to grow in wholesomeness, be filled with wholesomeness. So when he uses language like abandon, it's always something that's harmful.

Connected to that, the opposite: he has language that he uses a lot that we often don't hear about, which is a language of becoming filled, fulfilled, filled fully with wholesomeness, with all these wonderful qualities that come with the practice. So we have that example in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, where what we abandon is the hindrances, but what we get filled with is the seven factors of awakening.

So someone who becomes free in Buddhism is free of what obstructs who they really are, truly are, who we are when we're not obstructed, and we're filled. There's something within us. We're not a blank. It's not a nothing.

And so, one of the things that the tradition talks about is that someone who has removed enough of the obstructions from their own inner life, they don't describe that person as someone now inspired to practice the Eightfold Path. But rather, it's described that this is a person who has become the Eightfold Path. Or in one place in the *suttas*, someone asks, “What do you mean by the stream-enterer? What's the stream?” And he says, “It's the Eightfold Path.”

You're dipping into currents that flow within you, not something, not a nothing, not a practice. But rather, qualities of character, qualities of personality, qualities of beingness that can arise when we don't cling. The Eightfold Path is a description of someone who doesn't cling, and you can go through them a little bit, some of them to some degree, and kind of look at that.

So, like the *sīla* section, the middle: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. It's all about what you don't do. You've ceased doing things that are fueled by craving and clinging. You no longer lie. You no longer steal. You no longer kill people, at least intentionally, purposefully.

You don't have wrong livelihood. That means things—apparently, it means things like you don't sell weapons, alcohol, poisons, or people. No trading in people. Thank you. For someone who's enlightened, there are these things, so it's to describe what is not happening.

And so, a lot of these things that grow, the Eightfold Path grows in us, has a lot to do with the innate way that we can be when there are no obstructions. The unwholesome grows with clinging, grows with attachment. The wholesome grows with the opposite, with non-attachment. And that's right effort: doing the things that support the wholesome.

Wrong effort is doing the things that support the unwholesome. Right effort is doing what grows the wholesome. And if the two are completely connected to clinging and non-clinging, then we see how non-clinging makes it possible for the wholesome to grow.

So, the sacred absence. And it's possible to recognize the absence. It's possible to know, "I was caught in aversion, ill will, for a while—fifteen, twenty years. I had a resentment to someone, and it's gone. It's absent. Wow, what was I doing all those years?" This is phenomenal to have that.

I remember when, many years ago, probably thirty or more years ago, there I was teaching retreats up in the Mount Santa Cruz Mountains here at Shikokuji. And a woman came to a number of these retreats I taught, and she came back. She was there one year, and she came back for the same retreat the following year. And she said, "Gil, since that retreat, since I was at the retreat last year, for this last year, I have no longer been cynical."

I looked at her. "Really? Just a little retreat did that?" She said, "Yes, somehow something happened there, and then being cynical just dropped away completely for me. No inclination to it. It hasn't happened in a year."

That's a wonderful example of what's possible. I've known people who have had resentments for many years, and then in a moment they dropped it. They understood something. They saw it differently.

So it's possible to recognize these absences. "Wow, look at that!" And it's possible to have faith, or inspiration, or firsthand knowledge, even, that it's possible to have *nibbāna*. It's possible to be without obstruction. It's possible for these things to drop away.

And what helps, I believe, is to begin to become sensitive to absences. And in a retreat like this, a month long, each of you, for a period of time, is free of things that in your ordinary, everyday life maybe have plagued you and bothered you. And, you know, it's a big deal to come to a month-long retreat and feel some kind of settling and quieting, and some of the preoccupations recede into the distance, and we find ourselves not preoccupied by the same things.

And to recognize, "Wow, that's possible. This puts me in a better place. I'm calmer. I'm more present." And more importantly than calm or being present, it gives us new information by which to live our life.

We can sense and feel better and better what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. We have the inner instrument to recognize when we do something and it makes it unwholesome for us, and when we do something and it supports the growth of the wholesome. We can read ourselves. We can feel that we get more and more sensitive.

The more we're— the less and less we're preoccupied, less and less we're caught in the grip of things, attachments and busyness and spinning mind—the more sensitive we become to the impact of what's happening deep inside in our hearts. And so, to settle and begin having this different sensitivity. And some of you, I think, have been a little bit troubled by that.

They say self-understanding is seldom good news, and so you may be troubled by that. But it's actually good news to know the bad news. It's actually good to see and recognize, because to be able to recognize, that means there are no obstructions from seeing the truth, to see how you operate, and to go through the layers inside and see all these things that maybe are not very flattering for you.

Oh, it's great that you're able to see it in a way that maybe you didn't see it before you came here. But right there, there's also a possibility to recognize the absences that are there. To be mindful of a mind with a foible is very different than you being the foible.

To recognize, "Oh, it's unfortunate, I have this challenge. But I'm not it. I see it there. Wow, there's some freedom there. There's some space around it. There's some calm around it. There's a simplicity in relationship to it. It's simply my foible."

That is not a small thing, because often we get glued and locked in this maze, labyrinth of complicated relationships to all this stuff. So, in this way, the so-called bad news in practice

is actually good news. It's the beginning of finding freedom. It's the beginning of having a different relationship.

And it helps, I think, to begin appreciating the sacred absence, the space around things, that part of you that can be aware without reactivity, the part of you that can be aware in a very simple way, a calm attention. Or sometimes, if not, it's also that calm, that simplicity, that spaciousness, that's around. That's the atmosphere in which you're here with, or that is just at the edges of your agitation, just beyond it.

So the absence of clinging, to begin finding yourself less and less attached, less and less pre-occupied, has a number of signs, a number of things to recognize. And one of them is: you tend to be calmer. There tends to be more peace. There tends to be more space around things.

There's room to be present for it, to breathe with it. We give it breathing room. At some point, letting go of clinging brings on a kind of—I call it a quiet happiness. And, you know, it's not an excited happiness.

You don't go skipping down the halls, yelling at all your friends, "Hey, come and look! This is so great!" It's more of a quiet happiness, just contented happiness. And then there can be a simplicity, a simplicity of being, a simplicity of attention, just kind of seeing it clearly and not making it a bigger deal than it needs to be.

And the last kind of sign of non-clinging, of somehow beginning to relate from this place of non-clinging, this unobstructed place within, is we tend to think from a different place. We think differently. The thinking mind is no longer the monkey mind.

And you probably all know the monkey mind metaphor, but it's the idea that before a monkey lets go of one branch, it's already grabbing the next one, reaching for it. So before we've kind of finished with one thought, we're already going on to the next thought and the next one. It just keeps going.

But when there's non-clinging, there's no grabbing for the next, grabbing for the next. There's breathing room for our thoughts. There's space. Thinking maybe becomes slower, deeper, quieter.

And slower, quieter thinking is not dumber thinking. It's often more creative. It's often smarter. It has time and ability to be connected to a wider inner life that we have than the monkey mind that's jumping from one thing to the other, that's preoccupied and spinning and concerned with its fears and angers.

So non-clinging gives rise to a different way of thinking, thinking from a different source within. So non-clinging is an absence, but all this great stuff comes from it. So that's why I think thinking of this as a non-obstruction is quite helpful. The obstructions are gone, and let's see what arises. Let's see what comes from that. What's the goodness?

So, on one hand, in this practice, we want to be able to recognize the non-clinging that's already here. And at some point, that experience of non-clinging, non-attachment, in practice becomes clear enough, full enough, that it's a little bit like a wow experience. "Wow, it's possible to be this free. It's possible not to have this."

And maybe something like the woman whose cynicism didn't come back. Something doesn't come back. Something is really now radically shifted, because all this space has been created in the heart and the mind. A very different orientation has been created.

And at some point, then, that space, the room, the simplicity, the calm of this absence, sacred absence, is kind of ever-present. It's ever available. It's right here. It might be small. It might appear only intermittently, but it's there to inform us and to be our teacher.

And here in this practice, the ideal ultimately is to become our own teacher. And the way we become our own teacher is to be able to read and feel and see clearly what's happening here. And one of the great inner teachers is, in fact, non-clinging.

Because some non-clinging will reveal the clinging that's left. Some non-clinging will show you the path forward. Step to the next step. Not clinging. The next step is where the non-clinging can be. The non-attachment can be.

You might not know what to do. You might not know where you're going. You might not have the answers for everything. But for the next two seconds, let's go into the next two seconds without clinging. I know what that is. I can feel that. I'll take the next step.

If I'm eating, I'll chew the next bite without clinging. If I'm concerned with something very difficult, let me take a deep breath and relax, and see if I can ask some interesting, useful questions of my preoccupation. Let me not just kind of get pulled around by these thoughts. Let me kind of relax a little bit and engage them, like you're a partner in a conversation.

"What are you hoping to accomplish by robbing the local bank? You know, what do you think the consequences might be? What is going on inside of you and all your plans about robbing the bank? And, you know, what does it feel like in there?"

You might start having a very different relationship to robbing-the-bank thoughts when you start that conversation, because you have the space, you have the non-clinging not to be

caught and glued to whatever those thoughts are. We step back and we start thinking differently.

So at some point in practice, it becomes very useful to include in your attention, your practice, what is absent. Or, even better, maybe not what is absent, but rather what significant things are absent, that you really—wow, that's really important. That's a good reference point.

And at some point, just simply the absence is a strong reference point. The absence of tension teaches you when there is tension. I'm quite capable of being tense, some busy thing in my life, important thing to do. And occasionally I have to do things which I find unpleasant, like doing my taxes.

And then I don't even notice the tension enough for something—I don't even notice the next level of tension that goes on, because I'm just so caught up in trying to do it. But there are times when we can see and feel the tension because we know the non-tension. We have a reference point.

So, what is the reference point for you? What is the reference point of absence that might be more like a sacred absence? And rather than filling the absence with more desires, more thoughts, more drama, is there some way that allowing the space, allowing the calm, allowing the simplicity of those absences to remain something you stay in touch with, can be signposts and guides and supports?

To help you, help it help you, so that your path forward is unobstructed—unobstructed by greed, hate, and delusion, unobstructed by cravings, attachments. And the point I would like to say is not so much only to be free of clinging, and then you can go into wonderfully enlightened retirement, but rather to live your life through that space that's been created, to live your life from this sacred absence, through the sacred absence.

Maybe your whole life will become sacred then, if that's where the source of how you live and how you speak and what you do is from that place. Yeah.