Sacred Absence

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So thank you for being here for this silent daylong. One of the characteristics of the day is kind of the absence of talking. Until now, it's been the absence of a *Dharma* talk.

I feel a little reluctant to speak because absences are pretty special. As I was going to ring the bell to end the sitting, I looked down at the bell. You know, we think of the bell as this object, this solid metal object.

But, in order for the bell to be the bell, there has to be a lot of absence, a lot of hollowness, void, for it to ring nicely. So what's the bell? The bell that's so important for us, is it the metal, or is it the absence in the middle? The absence is quite important.

So I like to think of the *Dharma* as pointing to sacred absence. It's a little bit controversial to use the word "sacred" in the context of Buddhism. Buddhists like to talk about profundity, so maybe deep absence, or *dhammic* absence.

But I like "sacred." There's a kind of delight and joy, and a sense of freedom or something. A kind of reverence, a warmth, that comes with the word "sacred." Like, this is special.

"Deep" doesn't quite do it for me. It's a little different. Maybe everyone has different associations with these words.

One of the places that absence is highlighted in Buddhism, without being explicit, is that Buddhism is often called a *magga*, *mārga* in Sanskrit, a path. In fact, the word "religion" is kind of Western. When they started translating Western languages into Japanese, Sanskrit, or Asian languages, one of their big challenges was to come up with a word that could translate "religion."

I think in Japan they made one up. But one of the closest words to our English word "religion" for Buddhists in Asia is the word "path." Sometimes they talk about different paths in India.

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There are different religions, in a sense, but what they all have in common is a path: a path of practice, a path of living.

Buddhism has it, and it's often emphasized as a path. Sometimes it's called the *Middle Way* or the middle path. I think of it in the Buddha's time, when he grew up, where there were forests, overgrown short jungles in some places, and a path is a clearing in a jungle, in a forest.

There's been a separation. There are no obstacles there. There's a path.

Just for the direct part of the path, there's nothing growing there. If something grew and blocked it, there wouldn't be a path anymore. There's an opening. There's an absence.

The forest might be overgrown except for the path. It's a clearing in the middle of it in which people can walk without any obstacles. So the very notion of Buddhism as a religion, as a path, involves some kind of very special absence that we can see and recognize, that opens up for us to find our way through this life.

And how do we know it? How do we find it? We find it by being attuned to absence, absences.

And so, an absence is nothing, right? So why bother? There's a wonderful rhyme, almost, in the idea of the presence of absence. The presence of absence. Where do we see that?

So in Buddhism, in Buddhist practice, in this practice we do, one way we kind of see it—again, the translations into English obscure this a little bit—is the word for hindrances. That which hinders our wisdom, hinders our ability to get concentrated, hinders our way to be wise in this world, is sometimes called in English "hindrances." But the Pāli word, the ancient word *nīvaraṇa*, means a covering.

It's something that's covering over. If you cover over a little seedling with a big, heavy blanket, it's not going to grow. So these hindrances are what prevent something within us from growing.

You remove the covering from yourself. You remove this hindrance, and something can grow that can't grow if the hindrance is there. It's the absence of that which dampens down or covers, gets in the way.

So the *five hindrances*, these coverings that prevent something really important from growing, are sensual desire, ill will, usually called sloth and torpor in English, restlessness and remorse, and doubt. These can be so strong for people that it's impossible for something to get through there or find a way. If it's a path, the path is blocked.

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These things stand in the way, and we don't progress because there's a hindrance that stands in the way. But to have these fall away, to have them not be there, is a phenomenal thing. In the teachings of the Buddha on mindfulness, he was very explicit.

One of the things to be mindful of is the absence of the hindrances. Like, you'd be very busy if you were doing that all the time. But the idea is, if you've really been caught in a hindrance attack—say you're really caught in some kind of sensual addiction—and you're troubled by it and it's challenging, and you're sitting in meditation for hours with sensual fantasies, or you're caught in aversion or hostility, ill will, and that's the fantasy about, you know.

Your content is so discouraging. There's been a day in meditation caught up in resentment, or you're caught in sloth and torpor, or restlessness, or remorse, or doubt, and it kind of bothers you. It's kind of exhausting and tiring to have this when it's really strong.

And then finally, you're free of it. It's gone. Wow! Oh, what a relief!

The instructions from the Buddha are: notice that absence, get a feel for it, let it register. This is what it's like. I knew what it was like to be caught in the hindrance. Now I get to know, feel, what it's like not to have it.

Part of the advantage of that is that the contrast between the presence of hindrance and an absence teaches us something. It helps us to understand the downside of the hindrances, the disadvantages of them, and helps us to appreciate how wondrous and wonderful absence is. On the surface of it, absence would seem like a drag.

What is absence? I mean, absence is pretty cheap. You don't even have to pay for absence. There's a lot of absence in this room.

There's absence of, you know, just space. Absence is not so sexy, or you don't get wealthy, and absence doesn't do much for you. But it turns out absence does a lot.

One of the things it does, as I've already said, is allow something to grow that's held in check otherwise. We hold ourselves in check a lot with our agitation, with our remorse, with our anxieties, with so many things. We get caught up in our attachments and clinging.

So to have those fall away and not be there is very significant. It's so significant that I like to call it a sacred absence or a *Dharma* absence. Because what do we gain in that absence?

We gain ourselves. What do we lose when we're caught in clinging, caught in anxiety, caught in resentments? In a certain way, we lose ourselves.

We've limited who we are to such a small degree, to one little channel, one little domain of, you know, my resentment fueling, you know, or my anxiety or my preoccupation. To have an

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absence of those preoccupations, an absence of that clinging, an absence of that anxiety, we gain ourselves. The paradox is: the more absence we have, the more we gain.

And what do we gain? We gain the growth of things. Beautiful qualities of heart can come.

Love is a product. The greater the love, the more absence there is. There's space and room.

I was really struck when I started doing Zen practice many years ago. I called the Zen practice a tenderizer of the heart. You know, like meat tenderizer.

Or, I said it felt to me like the crust around my heart was dissolving. When that dissolved, I was surprised how much love there was, and compassion, and the kind of heartfelt connection I had with the world. But there had to be an absence for that to happen: the absence of the crust.

Some people don't call it a crust. Some people call it armor that they have over their heart. I remember one of the, I don't know, important moments in my life that was not pleasant.

I think I was—I believe I was—fifteen. I was walking in a beautiful place in nature with a friend. The older friend, he was seventeen, and it was so wondrous.

It was high in the mountains: beautiful views, mountain snow-topped mountains. We were walking on this country road. In awe of all this, I said something like, "Why are we here?"

It was a statement of amazement. It wasn't like a question to be answered. It was a statement of amazement.

And he turned to me and said, "Don't be silly." I could feel the doors of my heart just close. I don't know, it took years for those to open.

Maybe you've had something like that, that something closed it, something happened. For me, the Zen practice slowly, slowly, this door opened. The crust came away.

That was so significant: that absence of that crust, that absence of a closed door. It made love possible, compassion possible, to grow.

In the Buddha's teachings, the absence of the hindrances is directly related to the growth of the *seven factors of awakening*, which are considered quite beautiful: the capacity to be aware, the capacity to really see clearly what's happening, the capacity to have a kind of wonderful vitality with our practice and how we live, the capacity for joy, the capacity for a deep peace or tranquility, the capacity for unification, becoming unified, becoming whole, and the capacity for something in Buddhism that is not so sexy in English, I think, which is equanimity.

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But equanimity is one of the most satisfying, inspiring, most beautiful states of heart and mind that a person can possibly experience, that I know of. The English word "equanimity" probably falls kind of flat on some people's ears. It feels like indifference or something, but it's really something very vital and alive.

Like something is completely great. What is great? It's the absence of reactivity, while the heart, the mind, is completely present and open and available, fully alive, without having to go on the roller coasters on the boardwalk.

Just fully there, without any reactivity, any tendency to get caught in being for or against. But that doesn't mean that we're kind of just pushovers. It's such a wonderful state of being.

And so, an absence. The most important absence in Buddhism is the absence of any kind of clinging, any kind of holding tight, contracting, resisting. The whole purpose of Buddhism could be said to be the ending of all clinging.

Sometimes the experience of awakening is described as the mind becoming free of clinging. Now, that's not so exciting either, because, you know, the absence of clinging. Well, clinging, yeah, it's kind of a drag maybe, but there are wonderful things to do.

There are roller coasters to go on and other things. Why would I want to have the absence of clinging? Well, to really have this experience of the heart set free, the heart—some people call it unshackled—the heart no longer restricted in any kind of way, is one of the most profound and wondrous and special experiences you can have.

To know that it's possible to bring suffering to an end, to know it's possible to have this very thorough, radical, all-the-way-to-the-very-bottom-of-our-being experience where suffering is no longer there. There's no suffering, no stress, no feeling of distress. That's kind of the promise of Buddhism: that that's possible, the ending of suffering.

And it ends with the end of clinging. Those two go hand in hand. So to experience that end of clinging, that absence of clinging, that absence of suffering, is profound.

It's really special. It's like, wow, this is possible. It's possible to live this way, to live available to the world without any of the barriers that clinging causes.

It's kind of sacred. Some people say the whole world becomes sacred. The whole world becomes somehow the *Dharma*, not because the world is always such a great place.

This is not an affirmation of the terrible things that happen in the world. But the way the heart meets everything is so special. Our heart is not dependent anymore on how things are in the world.

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Rather, it radiates freedom. So if you walk out of here today, and you know what happens, you see something unusual—maybe someone vomited on the sidewalk—it's kind of wondrous. I mean, you might want to think, you know, someone needs my help.

Maybe I should look around and see if someone could use some little help here, or maybe I should clean it up so people don't slip on it. All these wonderful thoughts can come. But it's like, wow, this too is kind of special.

This too is like this wondrous world. Not because the vomit is, exactly, but because the mind has an absence of reactivity, an absence of clinging, an absence of disgust, an absence of resistance to it. Why bother with those things?

Why bother with resistance? Why bother with disgust? Why bother with being against it or something?

I mean, we're diminishing ourselves in doing that. We're filling that absence with things that are kind of a drag for us. Why bother?

Why go from a good state to a bad state? That's the great question in Buddhism. Why do we make it worse?

That question is particularly powerful when we've done this Buddhist practice to the point of really having experienced absence in a profound, wholehearted, full way. Wow! This is good.

The more good it is, the more contrast you have to answer the question: Why make it worse? Why do I give this something good up for something worse? So you see the vomit out there.

Why make it worse? Wow. Okay, something needs to be done. I should clean it up.

That's okay. So I don't know if vomit is the best example, but you get the idea. You have your own examples.

You can come up with them. Sure. Why make it worse?

Why not make it better? Why not keep your heart open? Why not keep your mind open?

Why not keep your mind free of ill will, free of objectification, free of conceit? Because it feels so much better without those things. So this Buddhist practice is kind of helping us to find, experience, a profound sacred absence.

So it becomes a reference point for us for living a wise life, a good life, a happy life, a life that is here that will make things better. Hopefully, not only for ourselves, but also for others. Also, sacred absence.

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Who would have believed that nothing could be so wonderful? May you celebrate the nothing of coverings, hindrances, clingings. May your awareness, may your consciousness, be free of all clinging.

So, thank you. Again, thank you for being here today. I appreciate all of you being here and doing this.

I don't take it as a small thing. It's actually quite special to do this for yourself, for community, and for the world. The custom here, and it's a custom that goes back centuries and centuries in Buddhism, is that it's the people who practice at a practice center who care for it.

We don't have anybody on staff here. It's just us that take care of it. So, at the end of a daylong, we ask for about seven people to stay behind.

It takes about ten minutes to vacuum this floor, to empty the trash, to clean the kitchen, to go around and find all the paper cups that have been left around with a little bit of tea in them, and just kind of clean up the place. There are four bathrooms. There's the kitchen.

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