

Be, See, Free, We (2 of 10) The Signless Door of Liberation

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The topic for the beginning of this series of talks is the doors of liberation. The word “doors” implies that there's something to pass through or something that's a clear demarcation for something on the other side. It also suggests this is a clear, complete going someplace. It's not partial. Freedom is not partial. Full freedom, full liberation is possible.

There are said to be three doors to walk through. For different reasons, different doors open for different people.

The way that the movement to the more complete experience of liberation can happen, for some people, the door of the signless opens – the door that has no

sign, no attributes. For other people, it is the door of the wishless – having no desire. For some, it's the door of emptiness, where there's no attribution or involvement with self, where we see that things are empty.

No one really knows why some people go through one door rather than another, or why at different times different doors open for people. The three doors are closely related, almost like three different perspectives on the same movement of release that's possible. But there are catalysts. Certain insights are catalysts for a deep letting go.

For today the topic is the signless. In modern English terms, we might consider what's called “a sign” in Buddhist language to be an attribute – something that we attribute to something. The mind attributes things. We project onto things our ideas and concepts of what things are. Sometimes that's quite innocent, and it's also expected that we would do this. If you see two doors, and one has a sign saying “entrance” and one says “exit,” that's attributing meaning, purpose, and function to a door. We've already attributed something to it by looking at it – that's a door.

I think there was a time in humanity's history, maybe hundreds of thousand years ago, when there were no doors. If someone just propped a door up against a tree, they would have no clue that this was a door. But if a

modern person saw a door up against a tree, we basically know what doors look like. (There's a door up against a tree, and that's kind of odd.) The door-ness, the attribution of “door” to it, is in the mind that attributes.

We think it's inherent in the door because our society around us is sharing in that attribution. But in fact, the mind is involved in doing it. The mind has a sign, an idea, a concept, or a projection – that's a door. That's innocent enough. With entrance and exit doors, we're expected to cooperate with those kinds of attributions, and it's useful so we don't get bottlenecked with everyone going in and out to the same door. Attributing has usefulness, and it's innocent enough in that example.

But there are all kinds of attributions and projections of ideas onto ourselves, the world around us, and onto people that are a source of tremendous suffering. Bias, prejudice, racism, and objectifying someone as our sexual object – what a horrible thing to do – are all projections, attributions that we place on something out there.

In Buddhist language, we're involved in sign-making. We do more than make signs, make attributions, and live with them. This can get quite extreme. There can be

a lot of fixation and tension involved in these signs and attributes.

For some people, the mind is constantly involved in the world of “aboutness” – thinking about things, thinking about later today, thinking about yesterday, thinking about my friend, thinking about work, thinking about what's for dinner. The mind is usually thinking about something, and whenever the world is about something, we are involved in a world of signifying – signs, attributions, ideas, and projections. This actually takes work. The mind is actively involved, and if we're fixated on and attached to these ideas we have, there can be a lot of suffering around them.

As practice quiets, as the mind gets stiller and calmer, there's less and less projection and attribution. This is not a strange thing. People take vacations; they take a day off from work; they go sit in a park and just look at the river going by or the grass growing. They can feel the tensions of work and the tensions of the week falling away. The mind is no longer racing, thinking, and worrying about things constantly. It can be so nice to just let go of everything.

When ordinary people who don't meditate sit in the park on a day off, so much can drop away. Much of the signifying, attributing, and projecting onto things with

work or with difficulties at home may fall away. It can be nice just to sit in the park and be left alone.

With meditation, we can have that experience in a very profound, deep way. Meditation is profoundly letting oneself alone – a profound experience of the mind when it is not doing the work of projecting, signifying, wanting, and making attributions on everything. We don't pick up the signs. We don't get involved with them. One way this operates and opens up for us is when we are profoundly in the present moment, having found our way to just being here in a very complete way.

The experience of being here is felt to be changing, ever-changing, moving, in flux, and arising and passing. There's a constant movement. We realize that it's the signifying, the projections of the mind that see permanence or constancy. This is not eternal permanence, but at least for today or for these next five minutes, we have ideas that this is how things are.

When we see everything moving, changing, and flowing, at some point the mind realizes that its movement to signify, to project, and to have a fixed idea of things is not really accurate in the moment. A fixed idea can't really land anywhere. Things are constantly shifting in such a way that by the time we have attributed or interpreted something as “this is how it is,” putting a name or label on it, it has already shifted and

changed to something else in our experience – in the constantly shifting nature of perception.

Although this sounds like we are very busy, it's very relaxed. Seeing change is like looking at a river going by where the current and the wavelets are constantly moving. It is the constant movement that is so deeply relaxing.

When we have that experience in meditation with a lot of stillness and quiet, at some point, for some people, the mind lets go of its tendency to project and to attribute names, concepts, and signification onto what that flowing, changing nature of phenomena is. Then the movement of signifying, of having signs, releases. That feeling of release can be quite compelling for our whole system. Something very deep – a deep holding, deep attachment – just lets go.

Then a person has gone through the door of the signless. And that's kind of nice. One thing that's nice about it is realizing that we don't have to be so constantly involved with our thinking, our signifying, our attributing, and our projection. We see that the mind can take care of us quite nicely when the mind is free, without us needing to ride or be intense or fixated on what we're thinking about.

I'll end with this metaphor. You're going for a long hike across a long, flat plateau, and you're thinking that the edge of the plateau is a steep cliff you have to come to and look over the edge. The whole way over there, you're worried about the steep cliff. While you're on the flat plateau there's no need to think about what's going to happen at the end or worry about how you're going to take care of yourself.

But when you come to that cliff eventually, after many hours, lo and behold, your psychophysical system somehow knows not to get too close to the edge of the cliff. Your system knows to stay back five feet, six feet, ten feet, so you're safe. This does not have to be thought about so much. The whole system just knows how to do that. All those hours of worrying about the cliff and how you were going to take care of yourself weren't really needed because the psychophysical system, to some degree, just knew how to take care of itself when it got close to the edge.

I don't know if that's the best example, but maybe it gives you some sense. I'm trying to point to some ability in the mind. When the mind is free, when it's no longer actively signifying and projecting, it still operates. Often it operates in such a way that we can take care of ourselves with less self-involvement. A liberated mind will know how to take care of itself. We don't have to be

so actively involved as we are when we're fixating on the projections and significations of things.

So, the signless. Tomorrow I'll talk about the wishless. Thank you for listening and being here, and I look forward to our time tomorrow.