

Mindful Letting Go (5 of 5) Liberating Absence and Relinquishment

September 25, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

clarity, release, attachment, clinging, liberation, absent, illness, death, freedom, awakening, emptiness

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We come to the end of the week on mindful letting go, wise letting go. Letting go is central to the Buddhist path of awakening, together with clear mindfulness and awareness of what's happening. The two go hand-in-hand because the more we let go of our preoccupations and hindrances, the clearer we can see. We can see the ways in which we continue to be attached or continue to obscure fuller and fuller clarity. These two together represent the higher, deepening aspects of the Buddhist path to freedom. There is this seesaw, going back and forth between allowing something to let go, release, seeing more clearly, and then further release.

The deepest release happens when there is equanimous and relaxed clarity. There has already been so much letting go that the threads of attachment,

clinging, and holding on are so thin that it is relatively easy for them to let go on their own. We can let go into a wonderful absence.

Liberation, the ultimate awakening, is usually defined by what is absent – the absence of attachments, clinging, preoccupation, greed, hatred, delusion. The common definition of liberation is what is absent. But it is an absence that is phenomenally significant for people. And we can know that absence.

Absences are very important for human beings. A common absence is when someone dies. Their absence is felt acutely, maybe for the rest of one's life. Another example might be if someone has been very sick and physically limited for a long, long time, and then there's a cure and they become free of that. The freedom from illness, the absence of illness, is so significant because of how long they were limited by it. There is a sense of joy, delight, excitement, gratitude, and appreciation. Maybe the person never forgets that the illness is no longer there. There is an absence.

With awakening, there is an absence. On the way to awakening, there are all these little movements of letting go, releasing, putting down, and opening up that goes on. Part of what we can be mindful of is the absence that follows letting go, that follows releasing. This absence can be a teacher. It can show us where we're

still attached. They say that as people get more and more free, they became more and more sensitive to even the slightest attachment and clinging that goes on. So we let go into that absence, and the absence becomes a teacher.

The absence also begins to work on us. If the absence is powerful and thorough enough – to really have something like hatred, cynicism, jealousy, or envy disappear, which has been a burden for a long time – then the sense and feeling that is left is one of absence, of freedom from. It is almost like a little bit of space has been created – space in the heart, space in the mind, space in the body. The space then becomes a teacher, a guide, or even a force inside to expand that space, to expand that openness, to expand that non-clinging.

So, when the letting go in practice is strong enough, something happens inside – there is a shift inside – such that letting go no longer becomes something we do and choose, but rather becomes a movement, a momentum that has its own life within us. It's like we've entered into the current of a river, and the current will carry us downstream.

We enter into a kind of current of freedom, a current of absence, a current of space and openness. If we tune into it and recognize it – or even if we don't tune into it, but it tunes into us – there is a movement to keep

expanding it, keep opening, keep letting go. It is a momentum, a movement towards greater and greater freedom, where we are the recipient of it. We ride along. We are no longer the active doer, except to keep opening to it.

It is possible to have some significant letting go (freedom) and then get preoccupied in the world and have very little space for that inner momentum. It still operates but much more slowly. It is also possible to become aware of that freedom and make space for it – allow it, give time for it – so that it can have more time to live, more breathing room, in a sense, to do its work: to keep freeing us, keep opening up, keep going.

So absence becomes very important in Buddhism. It's really part of the movement toward freedom. Absence is also important because of how it frees up vitality, energy, attention, presence, compassion, and wisdom. All kinds of things can flow. When they flow through that freedom, that emptiness, or out of that emptiness in a sense, there is a feeling or a clear sense that they are not exactly personal. It is difficult to say, "this is mine" or "me" because we are not the agent. We are not exactly responsible for it.

It is happening almost in spite of whatever self-identity or self-conceit we have or self-ideas of being the subject, the agent, for our lives. The Dharma is moving

through us. Freedom is moving through us, and the freedom is not something we can appropriate for the self.

On the way, as we get some sense of freedom, a sense of significant letting go, there is one further movement related to letting go that is very important. I would like to use the word “relinquishment” to represent this aspect of letting go because relinquishment does kind of mean letting go. But, in my vocabulary, I think of relinquishment as a clear choice – a mature, wise choice. To relinquish something is more than just letting it go and letting it drop. Relinquishment is a conscious act of giving something up.

The Pali word for relinquishment also means generosity (to give), so it’s giving over. If we say “give up,” it can seem like we are surrendering and just dropping something. But if we give over, then there is a clear choice to give something over. So, relinquishment involves a choice.

Sometimes as the practice goes along, as letting go deepens, we can let go of things a little bit. Or we let go temporarily, but our attachments come back. They keep returning. But we’ve had enough of a taste of freedom from particular attachments, and so there can be a choice: “I’m going to relinquish this. I no longer stand behind this. I’m no longer interested in this.”

So, on the one hand, there is a movement of freedom that we're not the agent of and we allow to happen. We don't rely on that only, but we certainly allow for it, and that grows over time. On the other hand, we also (if we want) reflect and consider in a mature, wise way what our attachments are, what we're clinging to, what we're holding on to, and we can make a choice. We can have a commitment, a devotion, a dedication, a clear statement, "I now relinquish this." That means: "I do not stand behind it. I do not believe in it anymore. I am not going to invest in it."

Because of the power of habit, that might not mean we stop doing it. But the heart can choose to make a vow, a commitment, not because it's a duty to do so, but rather because we know better. We know how we want to live. We know what we don't want to be doing anymore. So, there is also this choice.

There is a wonderful combination of that which we open up to when we let go – that is a freedom from self, freedom from doer – and the mature, wise choice that we make to do something differently.

I hope that the topic of letting go this week has inspired you. I hope I've been able to do it in such a way that you don't feel that letting go is a drag, a diminishment, or a loss, but rather letting go is a gain, an enhancement.

Maybe you become stronger in some ways. Something inside of you becomes stronger, fuller, and maybe more powerful. They say that when someone is fully liberated, there is a kind of power that comes through that freedom.

May you let go wisely, and may you discover all the benefits that can come from such letting go. Thank you.