

# Be, See, Free, We (4 of 10) The Emptiness Door of Liberation

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Today we will talk about the third door to liberation. The opening of these three doors is built on developing ourselves, becoming stable and happier, with a sense of well-being and self-confidence, so that we can see deeply into the nature of this world. With that seeing we can begin to release our fixations, until the point where we can become free.

To be, to see, to be free, and then to open up wider into the sense of “we” – the community of living beings that we are part of on this planet. Sharing the world with a sense of “we” is difficult if we are preoccupied or caught in the sticky spider web of self, selfishness, and self-preoccupation – me, myself, and mine. So a big

part of Buddhist practice is about becoming free, but specifically free of this spider web, this net, this trap of self that's so easy to get caught in. For this reason, there are a lot of teachings in Buddhism about not-self (some people call it “no-self”).

To plunge into that teaching of non-self directly, some people get the wrong impression, as if they're supposed to not count, or supposed to be very self-effacing, or supposed to be selfless in a way that is an unhealthy form of self-denial. It might be more useful to think of the path as a maturation process. Knowing oneself, knowing where one is spatially in relationship to other people, learning the ability to recognize one's own feelings, emotions, and thoughts and track them, and learning to be careful with them as we go through the world – all this requires what we might call a “self-focus” – an inner focus and awareness.

Mindfulness practice certainly is a waking up to a greater capacity to know ourselves and to experience the fullness of our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, motivations, and sensations. Opening to this is part of the richness of this practice. To some degree, we have to realize that the idea of self is actually developmentally very important for human beings. As children grow up, developing a sense of who they are,

and a strong sense of efficacy, confidence, and self-awareness is just part of the deal.

Growing up and being a young teenager is awkward sometimes. It is like riding a bicycle where there is a lot of self-consciousness. It requires a lot of self-awareness to find our balance and find our way. When we're trying to learn how to ride a bike, and maybe just beginning to get the hang of it, and people show up that you have a lot of respect for, and what they think of you is really important, suddenly a lot of self-consciousness can come into play, and it messes up our ability to ride the bike.

Focusing on ourselves is developmentally necessary. Thinking of not-self as a way of dismissing the developmentally important ways in which we become strong, balanced selves in the conventional sense does people a disservice.

So it might be more useful to think of non-self as developmentally maturing beyond the limitations of self. We have to have enough self-awareness and self-wisdom to eventually be so skilled with living, like riding a bicycle, that we don't have to be self-conscious anymore. We don't have to be so self-focused on all the details of what goes on. When we mature, a lot of things become second nature.

With that foundation of knowing how to manage the world, we can let go in a deeper way. We can grow and flower in a way in which we're more, we're bigger, and we're not limited by any self-concept. We might still have self-concepts when they're useful, but we're not fooled by them, constricted by them, or limited by them. We enter into them freely when necessary, and we're ready to shed them when they're not necessary.

We learn the developmental capacity of living our life like a fully skilled bicycle rider who can unselfconsciously ride the bike and, “Look – no hands!” We can just ride the bike with freedom. We don't diminish ourselves by letting go of self-concern, but we accept the healthy aspects of self-concern, and we grow beyond it. In meditation especially, we learn to not be limited by anything.

Seeing that we're more is usually not talked about in Buddhism, because of the danger of identifying with the “more.” The “more” becomes a thing, and then people hold on to it. There's a very strong tendency not to assert anything as “this is the way it is,” because of the danger of identifying with that. What we do in Theravada Buddhism instead is to recognize that things are not self.

Take this clock that we have here in front of me; it belongs to IMC, and it says “insight” on it. Clearly, it's not my clock. I would say it's a clock, but it's not me, myself, and I. It's relatively easy to not identify with a clock as being me. But in some functional way, I could be concerned about how people think of me depending on the clothes I wear. I hope you realize that this shirt that I wear is a very prestigious shirt for a Dharma teacher to wear. I'm sure my status as a Dharma teacher and your infinite appreciation of me is completely dependent on the shirt that I wear. And now I'm really caught up in self and shirts.

But I could also say that shirt is not me. I don't have to define myself by my shirt. The shirt is not self. I'm more than that. I can open up and relax. Functionally there is a feeling of relaxation and opening rather than being preoccupied by what you think about my shirt.

As we do mindfulness practice we start seeing that, in our minds, with all these things it doesn't really work to say “This is who I am.” But these are not me – my thoughts, my beliefs, my opinions, my abilities or non-abilities, my physical characteristics, all kinds of things. In a sense, they're important and have a role in life. But we don't have to limit ourselves by them. We don't have to define ourselves by them.

And as we become more skilled, wiser, more mature, and more confident, we become greater than all that. But in Theravada Buddhism that movement of freedom is found through seeing “*This* is not self.” *This* is not self. It's always a particular thing. With anything that the eyes can land on or that perception can take in, at some point we say, “Wow, not that, not that, not that.”

We are not dismissing anything. Everything may have a role, a time, and a place. But we let go of the clinging and the holding, which maybe we can understand is the same as saying, “More. More.” As soon as we identify with “more,” that's a limitation. Seeing this, we recognize that any *thing* – any specific thing our eyes can land on or that we can feel or perceive – is empty of self. It doesn't qualify as the central organizing agent that controls and runs the whole show of self, or as the thing that we define ourselves by, whether as the active agent to do something or the recipient of experience – the victim of things.

The central locus of identification around me, myself, and mine is seen as, “Not that, not that, not self.” It is empty of self. When that sense of more, emptiness, space, and freedom begins to open fully around the idea of self, then a person is said to go through the door of emptiness – that which is empty of self. The idea is that of an open, empty door – a door that's open. The door frame is empty of door and you can go through it.

Emptiness is seeing the empty space or the empty nature of this thing called “self.” This does not mean we are limited or become smaller. We grow, develop, and become more mature and more free. Maturing is part of the developmental cycle of human beings. We become so at ease, so peaceful, so free, so mature, and have so much self-understanding that we are able to trust letting go of holding on to self, measuring self, or being with self.

There are times and places where ideas of self are functionally important, and sometimes we coagulate around it in useful ways. But meditation is a laboratory where hopefully it's safe where we sit, and where we can allow the natural maturing process of human beings to occur. Here we no longer limit ourselves or hold ourselves back with ideas of self – ideas of a central agent, central receiver of experience, or victim of experience. We can open to “more” and be free.

Emptiness is not an easy thing, and it's not meant to dismiss anything. It is not meant to limit us or make us less than who we are. Emptiness is a maturation. It is a freedom. It means going beyond.

The door of emptiness is the door where self-preoccupation and self-concern become quiet and still. That's one of the reasons why meditation is an

important doorway for this. In meditation, the mind becomes more alert and quieter. As self-concern, self-preoccupation, self-definition, and self-locus become quieter, in the emptiness of self, the more than self, the vastness, and the freedom, the third door of liberation can open.