

Intro to Mindfulness Pt 2 (16) The Calm of Non-Clinging

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Hello on this Monday morning, as we begin a new theme that is a continuation of the series I've been giving on the Introduction to Mindfulness.

Last week I talked about mindfulness of clinging. One of the Buddha's common teachings about clinging is the way that clinging gathers together and accumulates over time so that there are bundles of clinging. The opposite of this is non-clinging and the absence of accumulated clinging.

In mindfulness, we want not only to notice what's present. There comes a time in mindfulness when we want to be mindful of what is absent. At any given moment, there are an infinite number of things that are absent in our awareness. We can be quite busy if we try to take into account all of them. But in this practice, we want to notice in the moment some of the salient absences that are really significant in relation to clinging: the absence of clinging. We want to appreciate that absence and make room for more of it. Recognizing the value, the goodness, and the healthiness of non-clinging supports the heart, the mind, the body, and our whole system to become more oriented to the world of non-clinging.

Growing up, many people are not taught to pay attention to the qualities and characteristics of a non-clinging heart and mind. If anything, somehow or other, we get the message to cling more, want more, be attached, have more, and do more. Or, because we're afraid, we get the message that we have to clamp down, hold back, shrink, and resist, all of which is a form of clinging as well. But something phenomenal can happen when we start orienting ourselves to non-clinging. So that's the theme for this week.

One way this works is that we begin to recognize the symptoms of non-clinging – the qualities and characteristics of what it's like when we're not clinging as much. Rather than setting up a really hard line between clinging and not clinging, an either-or, I think it's more realistic to recognize that there's a range that is like a seesaw, where sometimes there's more clinging, sometimes less, but they can coexist. We might have some minor clinging, but mostly we're peaceful and at ease. There might be some major clinging and we don't really recognize that part of us is calm and relaxed. These things can coexist and we want to start recognizing that there is also non-clinging here.

One exercise you can do is to recognize something obvious that you're currently not clinging to. This doesn't have to be something that you have previously clung to. It could be, but it could also be some ordinary object that's around you. Maybe you have no clinging to the light switch on the wall. It never occurred to you to cling to that or be attached to it.

You can feel how when you take in and are aware of the light switch on the wall, in the awareness there's an absence of for or against, an absence of trying to hold on to it, and an absence of associations or building up a sense of self around the light switch. If it's a light switch in your house, maybe you're not completely innocent about it. There might be something else you can think about that has that quality – something so ordinary that it never would have occurred to you to think about clinging to it.

You can get the sense that there is an absence there – an absence of tension, an absence of resistance, and an absence of identification perhaps. In that absence, there might be some hints of calm, peace, or tranquility.

The Buddha said that tranquility is the food for tranquility. If you notice and are aware of the ways you're calm, that develops more calm. Whether the word is "tranquility," "calm," "peace," or "ease," one of the things we want to notice is the tranquility of non-clinging. Appreciating it is one way of recognizing it.

I've been in situations where I let go of something, but my mind was so oriented to grasping that letting go of one thing just meant that my mind was ready to grab the next thing. The metaphor that the Buddha gave for the clinging mind is a monkey swinging from branch to branch. As soon as the monkey lets go of one branch, even before it lets go of it, it is already reaching for the next branch. There is a continual grabbing as it swings along. In this way, the movement of grasping can be so great.

I remember going to the supermarket once with my son when he was small enough to hold him in my arms as we were shopping. Sometimes he started wanting things in the supermarket. I remember once he wanted something really desperately, but he didn't know what it was. As I was holding him, he reached his arm back to grab at what was behind him. It didn't matter what it was – he just wanted it. It was a movement of grasping.

Notice the degree of non-clinging that is present for you when you have some degree of tranquility and calm. Look for calmness during the day. Look for how you can be tranquil. Look for ways to be calm. It is certainly possible to overemphasize calm and tranquility. It's possible to get attached to it. It's kind of a paradox that when people get calm, they sometimes hold on and cling to it, and then they get tense from holding on to it. There can be such a strong preference for calm that it qualifies as a kind of attachment. There can be a lot of judgments about not being calm, which is a kind of attachment as well.

The idea is to hold this very lightly. Hold your calm lightly, hold your attention lightly, and begin to appreciate the degree to which you're no longer grasping, clenching, compulsive, and being driven by whatever is driving your emotions and thoughts, and activating your body. Appreciate calm.

As they begin to get a greater and greater feeling for and experience of letting go and non-clinging, appreciating what the field of non-clinging feels like – the body, mind, and heart that doesn't cling – is a very important teaching for people who develop and mature in this practice. It's very important to feel into that and to take in the goodness and the wholesomeness of non-clinging.

For today, the suggestion is to notice the calm or tranquility that comes with non-clinging. On this day, may you let your calmness (or tranquility, ease, peace, lightness – whatever quality speaks to you the most) be a theme that runs through your day. Appreciate when it's there. Take time to see whether it's there even when you haven't noticed it because you're so busy doing things. Make more room for tranquility.

Notice if tranquility is a food for tranquility – if tranquility supports more tranquility. But more importantly, does tranquility support non-attachment, non-clinging, non-grasping, and non-compulsion? I hope you enjoy the day of tranquility, at least the exploration of it. If you find no tranquility at all, I hope you enjoy how seeing that highlights what is happening for you and that you can be mindful of that. Thank you.