

The Power of Gone

*And until you know of this:
How to grow through death
You're just another grumpy guest,
On the gloomy earth.*

-Holy Longing by Goethe

Students sometimes ask me “is there a quickest path to enlightenment?” My standard answer is “perhaps, but I don’t think it’s currently known by humanity. In our current stage of spiritual science (*dhamma*), different approaches seem to work for different people. That’s why I like to give you folks a wide range of contrasting techniques to choose from.”

A few days ago, I decided to do a thought experiment. What if I were only allowed to teach one focus technique and no other? Which technique would I pick? Hard choice. But I think it would be the technique I call “Just Note Gone.” Here’s why (and how).

How.

Here are the basic Instructions:

Whenever all or part of a sensory experience suddenly disappears note that. By note I mean clearly acknowledge when you detect the transition point between all of it being present and at least some of it no longer being present.

If you wish, you can use a mental label to help you note. The label for any such sudden ending is “Gone.”

If nothing vanishes for a while, that’s fine. Just hang out until something does. If you start worrying about the fact that nothing is ending, note each time that thought ends. That’s a “Gone.” If you have a lot of mental sentences, you’ll have a lot of mental periods – full stops, Gones!

Why.

Most people are aware of the moment when a sensory event starts but seldom aware of the moment when it vanishes. We are instantly drawn to a new sound, or new sight, or a new body sensation but seldom notice when the previous sound, sight, or body sensation disappears. This is natural because each new arising represents what we need to deal with in the next moment. But to always be aware of sensory arisings and hardly ever be aware of sensory passings creates an unbalanced view of the nature of sensory experience.

There is only a finite amount of real estate available in consciousness at any given instant. Each arising somewhere causes a passing somewhere else.

So what? Why should we care about whether we can detect the moment when a particular burst of mental talk, or a particular external sound, or a particular body sensation suddenly subsides?

As a first step in answering this question, let's start with an admittedly extreme example.

Suppose you had to go through some horrible experience that involved physical pain, emotional distress, mental confusion, and perceptual disorientation all at once. Where could you turn for safety? Where could you turn for comfort? Where could you turn for meaning?

Turning towards your body won't help. There's nothing but pain and fear there. Turning toward your mind won't help. There's nothing but confusion and uncertainty there. Turning toward sight and sound won't help. There's nothing but turmoil and chaos there.

Old-school Japanese Zen hits all those buttons: physical discomfort (from sitting), emotional distress (you're yelled at, humiliated, infuriated, intimidated), mental confusion (koans), perceptual disorientation (mastering the protocol takes years).

(Squirmy reality note: the reason that most people quickly cave under "waterboarding" is that it creates all of those effects simultaneously and to the max. This leaves a person without any resource to turn toward. Their will, their ability to think, their deeply held values, even the knowledge of who they are become instantly inaccessible.)

Under such extreme duress, is there anywhere you could turn to find relief? Yes.

You could concentrate intently on the fact that each sensory insult passes. In other words, you could reverse the normal habit of turning to each new arising and instead turn to each new passing. Micro-relief is constantly available.

Let's consider some reasonable objections to this scenario.

For one thing it might seem too extreme to be relevant. After all, most people on most days don't have to face all-encompassing horror. That's true. On the other hand, most people will probably experience something like that sometime (if only perhaps in the process of dying). More to the point, almost everyone experiences some level of fear around the fact that such things could happen to them. It would be a source of great comfort to know, based on one's own direct experience, that there is a place of safety so deep that nothing can touch it.

But is this example not rather negative and depressing? Is it not a sad state of affairs when a person's only source of meaning are the momentary micro-endings within a seemingly unending horror? And what good are "micro-endings" anyway? It would seem that if something is bad, the only ending that would mean anything would be the "macro-ending"—the ending of the bad thing itself. Can focusing on micro-endings really help much?

And besides, the example seems unbalanced. Isn't there more to life than relieving discomfort and avoiding confusion? What about getting satisfaction and finding meaning?

Let's address these points.

Relief

How much can micro-endings help? It depends. Depends on what? It depends on three things:

- Sensory Clarity: Your ability to detect moments of vanishing.
- Concentration Power: Your ability to stay focused on moments of vanishing.
- Inner Equanimity: Your ability to allow sensory experiences to come and go without push and pull.

You can think of equanimity as the ability to quickly and deeply say YES! to each new sensory arising. Quick and deep openness to an experience facilitates quick and deep gone-ness of that experience. This creates a positive feedback mechanism. The more equanimity you have at arisings, the easier it is to detect passings. The more you detect passings, the easier it is to have equanimity at arisings. This loop exponentially accelerates your learning.

With time, the Just Note Gone technique will sensitize you to detect vanishings more clearly. This combined with the equanimity loop makes it possible to continuously concentrate on vanishings. This in turn transforms micro-ending into mega-relief.

(Terminology note: "Concentration, clarity and equanimity working together" is my operational definition of mindful awareness.)

Tranquility

Does noting Gone produce any other positive effects besides a sense of relief? Yes. Some people find that noticing moments of vanishing creates a deep sense of restfulness. Visual, auditory or somatic tranquility may seem to propagate through consciousness whenever you notice a "Gone.". This is reasonable because each moment of cessation points to Absolute Rest—the Still Point of the turning world.

Fulfillment

So it makes sense that noting Gone could produce relief if you're passing through something unpleasant. It allows you to experience "This too *is* passing", which will give you a lot more comfort than just trying to remind yourself "This too *shall* pass." It also makes sense that noting Gone could create stillness and tranquility within you. Relief and tranquility are a natural consequence of the nature of vanishing.

But there is another effect that people often report and that seems to go against the nature of vanishing. Vanishing points to nothing, right? Yet, some people find noting Gone to be rich and sensorially fulfilling. This is hard to explain logically but can be experienced personally. In India there is a word that means both "cessation" and "satisfaction" as a single linked concept. The word is Nirvana. No other culture seems to have noticed this link. (Although medieval Christians would sometimes refer to the infinite richness of God as *nihil per excellentiam*, i.e., "nothing par excellence.")

Where things go to is where things come from. Each time you note Gone, for a brief instant your attention is pointed directly towards the richness of the Source. That is what's behind the seeming paradox of satisfying nothingness.

Love

Are there any other possible positive effects? Yes, noting Gone may lead to a spontaneous spirit of love and service (*bodhicitta*).

As you come to know the Source of your own consciousness, you also come to know the Source of everyone's consciousness—the shared formless womb of all beings. Someone with whom you share a womb is referred to as brother or sister. So noting Gone can lead to a spontaneous sense of oneness with (and commitment) to all beings. In Tibet, this is sometimes referred to as the Union of Means and Void.

So, Goneness, although seemingly cold and impersonal, is deeply connected to the issue of human fulfillment and human meaning. THIS FACT IS THE CENTRAL MYSTERY OF WORLD MYSTICISM.

Figure-Ground Reversal

As you become more sensitive to detecting Gone, you may come to a place where you note it so frequently that Goneness itself becomes an object of high concentration. The gaps between the "Gones" get shorter and shorter until a figure-ground reversal takes place. Gone becomes the abiding ground. Self and world become fleeting figures. Needless to say, experiencing something like this will have a huge impact on how you relate to aging and death.

People sometimes ask me why I don't make breath the centerpiece of meditation, as many teachers do. There seems to be a general impression that the ultimate goal of mindfulness practice is to be able to stay focused on the breath. I sometimes jokingly parody that notion with the slogan "Real meditators are able to come back to the breath." If you insist that I give you something to always come back to, I would say "Real meditators are able to come back to Gone."

The Dark Night

Are there any possible negative effects from working with vanishing and the related themes of Emptiness and No-Self? Occasionally there can be. In extreme cases, the sense of Goneness, Emptiness and No-Self may be so intense that it creates disorientation, terror, paralysis, aversion, hopelessness and so forth.

Unpleasant reactions such as these are well documented in the classical literature of contemplation both East and West. In the West, it is sometimes referred to as "The Dark Night of the Soul." In the East, it is sometimes referred to as "The Pit of the Void" or as "the unpleasant side of *bhanga*" (dissolution). This doesn't happen that often, but if it does, there are three interventions which you need to remember in order to transform the situation from problematic to blissful.

1. **Accentuate** the good parts of the Dark Night even though they may seem very subtle relative to the bad parts. You may be able to glean some sense of tranquility within the nothingness. There may be some sense of inside and outside becoming one (leading to expanded identity). There may be some soothing, vibratory energy massaging you. There may be a springy, expanding-contracting energy animating you.
2. **Eliminate** the negative parts of the dark night by deconstructing them through noting. Remember “Divide and Conquer”—if you can divide a negative reaction into its parts (mental image, mental talk, and emotional body sensation), you can conquer overwhelm. In other words, eliminate the negative parts by loving them to death.
3. **Affirm** positive emotions, behaviors, and cognitions in a sustained systematic way. By that I mean gradually, patiently reconstruct a new habitual self based on Loving Kindness and related practices.

In most cases, all three of these must be practiced and maintained for however long it takes to get through the Dark Night. In the most extreme cases, *it may require ongoing and intensive support from teachers and other practitioners* to remind you to keep applying these interventions. The end result, though, will be a depth of joy and freedom beyond one’s wildest imagining.

The Dark Night is a kind of awkward inbetween zone. The classic Johnny Mercer song from the 1940s gives a mnemonic for how to get through it quickly.

*Jonah in the whale, Noah in the ark,
What did they do, just when everything looked so dark?*

You gotta...

*Accentuate the positive
Eliminate the negative
And latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister Inbetween.*

Self-Inquiry

Where things go to is where they come from. There are many ways to explore the question “Who am I?” One of them is called Self-Inquiry. In that practice, whenever a sense of self arises, you ask “What’s behind this?” “Where did this *come* from?”

Another way to answer that question is to watch where things *go* to (i.e., Note Gone). Both approaches can be effective. The *very beginning* of what’s about to be can be found at the *very end* of what just was.

Meaning

Goneness has been known and cultivated in all ages and in all cultures inside and outside of all religious traditions. Hence, there are many synonyms for it, some of which seem to contradict each other! The following partial list of synonyms will give you an idea of the ubiquity and importance of this experience.

- Zero (according to Jōshū Sasaki Rōshi)
- Pure Consciousness (*Purusha* in Yoga)
- Cessation (*Cittavrittinirodha* in Yoga, *Nirodha* in Buddhism, *Cesó* in St. John of the Cross)
- The Source (*Ha Makom* in Kabbalah, *Kongen* according to Jōshū Sasaki Rōshi)
- The Witness (*Drashtri* in Yoga)
- True Self (*Ātma* in Hinduism)
- No self (*Anatta* in Buddhism)
- The Unborn (*Ajāta* in Buddhism and Hinduism)
- The Undying (*Amrita* in Buddhism and Hinduism)
- Nothingness (*Nihil, Nichts, Nada* in Christianity, *Ayn* in Judaism, *Shunyatā* in Buddhism, *Fanā'* in Islam, *Xū* in Daoism)
- Ground (*Grund* according to Meister Eckhart, *Gzhi* in Tibetan practice)
- True Love (*Shinjitsu no ai* according to Jōshū Sasaki Rōshi)



GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVĀHĀ