

Embracing Groundlessness: When Everything Seems Out of Control

by Leo Babauta

It's a fundamental fact of human life that we want our lives to be under control — we develop plans, goals, routines, systems, tools, schedules, structure to our lives.

But while developing some structure is a very helpful thing for most of us ... the truth is, there's so much that we don't control. Life is chaotic, out of control, shaky.

It's what Pema Chodron calls "groundlessness" — the feeling of no solid ground under our feet. Other Buddhists might call it impermanence, which is a basic fact of life that we very often don't want to accept. We don't like groundlessness. We want the solid ground.

So what do we do when life feels out of control, groundless?

We open up to the groundlessness.

Normally, we seek ground: some kind of control or permanence. The routines and systems, the hardened opinions about how life should be and how others should act, the comfort foods and distractions, any kind of semblance of certainty and comfort. It's why we procrastinate, put off healthy habits, get angry at others' behavior, and feel so much anxiety.

What if, instead, we could embrace the groundlessness?

What if we didn't have to run, but instead learned that it is a beautiful thing?

What if we opened up to its spaciousness, its deliciousness?

The Fresh, Open Experience of Groundlessness

We normally think of the world around us, other people, and ourselves as solid things. But in fact, the things we think of as solid are just our ideas of them. The things themselves are constantly in flux.

Consider yourself:

You think you're an individual person, separate from everything around you. But in fact, you breathe in the air around you, taking it in, and it becomes a part of you. What separates you from the breath of air you just took in?

You drink water and eat food that becomes a part of you, and that food was brought to you by others, the water was brought by a whole system of water distribution, a whole weather system before that. You are only existing because of everything around you.

Where do you begin and everything else ends?

You, in turn, are helping to create the world around you, and others around you. They owe their existence, in part, to you. Where do you end and others begin?

In fact, we're all just interrelated phenomena, constantly shifting, all interdependent, and the line between one thing and everything else is completely arbitrary, all in our minds.

OK, that might all seem intellectual. The idea is that nothing is as solid as we think, and everything is interconnected in such a way that we can't really say that "this is this, and that is that."

To take it to an experiential level, try this:

Pause for a moment and take in everything around you in this moment. Notice all the objects, the space, the light, the sounds. Bring everything around you, yourself included, into your awareness. See everything as less than solid. Imagine that everything isn't as solid as it seems. The air isn't solid, it's constantly flowing and changing — now imagine that everything else is similarly flowing and unsolid. Yourself included. Imagine that it's all just one big sea of changing fluid matter. Experience the openness. If nothing is solid and permanent, then everything is changing and open. Feel this openness as a freedom, a freshness, an exhilarating vastness. Relax into this openness, and feel its beauty.

This is the openness of groundlessness. Nothing is solid, nothing is fixed, but this is the good news! Openness is unconstricted, free, peaceful, and gorgeous.

Learning to Find the Beauty in Groundlessness

So things seem out of control, uncertain, groundless — and it brings up anxiety in you. How can we work with this?

First, we can allow ourselves to feel the sensations of uncertainty in our body, as physical sensations. How does your fear, anxiety, frustration feel in your body (dropping the narrative or story about it, just feeling the feeling)? Being present with this is a wonderfully courageous first step.

Next, we can experience the groundlessness of the situation. Your life is up in the air — feel the openness of this, the freshness of this moment, the freedom of nothing being fixed. It's a beautiful, delicious groundlessness.

Yes, you have some things to do — that's the practical aspect of needing to get things done in your life. We'll get to that in a second. But for now, just experience the beautiful freshness, freedom, vastness and openness of this groundless moment.

Relax into it. Appreciate its openness. See and feel it with fresh eyes, as if you've never experienced this particular open moment before (hint: you haven't, no one has). Let yourself melt into this open groundlessness. Let yourself fall in love with it!

Then, from this place of openness and love ... ask yourself what's the most important thing I can do right now? What's the most loving thing I can do for myself and others?

Take that next step, not out of anxiety or fear, but out of love.

Do it while experiencing the openness of the moment and your actions. Savor the

freshness and freedom as you act.

This is the way of embracing groundlessness.