

# Mindful Letting Go (1 of 5) Learning Go and Letting Be

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

desire

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The theme for this week is letting go. I use the term letting go as an umbrella term or a category for a whole family of movements, from simple relaxation of the body, the releasing of tension, to the full cessation of suffering, which is the end of the Buddhist path – and everything in between.

The Buddha has a lot of different words for this family of mental movements. Translated into English, they are such things as relaxing, tranquilizing, calming, relinquishment, giving up, release, freeing, liberation, freedom. It goes on and on like that. We could add other English words that are in the family of letting go. Each of them might have a little different quality, a distinct characteristic, which is appropriate in different places.

The path of Buddhism, in one way or the other, is to

bring something to an end. That something is our suffering – the ways in which we suffer because we hold on, we cling, we resist. But, with practice, we see it limits us. It diminishes and constricts us. It doesn't allow for the full flowering and thriving of our hearts, our minds, our being, our life.

So part of mindfulness practice is not just being present for things, seeing and being mindful, and being a little calmer and less reactive. It's also a platform, a means, by which to have the deepest and fullest letting go that is possible for a human being. The path there is to learn something about all the different shades or forms of letting go that a person can have.

Letting go is an ordinary activity. There's a tremendous amount of letting go that people do throughout the day. It probably doesn't take much reflection to realize how much you are letting go. It might sometimes be so automatic and easy that you don't even think of it as letting go.

For instance, you might expect to have a particular fruit for breakfast. You show up and the fruit is not there. It's all gone. "Okay, well, I wanted it, but it's not here. I'll have cereal instead or something else." In that moment, there is a kind of letting be, a letting go. You let go of the desire. Maybe it's so easy that you hardly even know you let go of it because there's no power in the desire.

To have fruit was just a nice thing to do.

You're expecting to go for a walk with a friend. These days in California, you wake up and some days the air is clean and other days there is smoke. As unfortunate as it is, you realize that you can't go on the hike because of the bad air. Maybe then, letting go is not that easy. Because of the strong desire and anticipation to be with your friend and the continued limitation of the smoke and Covid-19 on your life, you don't easily let go of the desire.

The desire remains but is frustrated. There is frustration, anger, weariness ("not again"), a collapsing – all because that desire was being held kind of strongly. This isn't like the simple letting go of the fruit at breakfast. Now, if you want to be free of all the secondary reactivity, it might require a deeper, more difficult kind of releasing of desire and putting it in the context of finding your freedom.

There are all kinds of very ordinary ways that life requires us to let go. We're driving down a road, expecting to get somewhere, and the traffic light turns red. We have to let go of pushing as fast as we can to get someplace. We let go for a few moments, but as soon as the light turns green, we might pick up that attachment again. Even as we're anticipating the light to turn green, we might pick up that clinging to get

somewhere fast.

We can sometimes feel physiologically the difference between holding on, wanting, and pushing ahead and letting go and settling back. In the car, we might let go when the traffic light is red. We stop, sit there, and rest. But as it gets closer to when we think the light will turn green, we can feel the tension build. The foot is poised to push the gas pedal as soon as it becomes green because we have to get somewhere. So this picking up and letting be – picking up and letting go – is part and parcel of everyday life.

In Buddhist practice, letting go is one of the things to be mindful of. Our topic this week, mindful letting go, builds on the foundation of the last four weeks, which was mindfulness of breathing, thinking, emotions, and the body. This is like taking that to the next level. With all that as a foundation – knowing how to be mindful and find our way with those different areas of our practice and our life – the next task is to become mindful of letting go.

This can be as simple as becoming mindful of all the ordinary ways we let go throughout the day. We're tense, standing in line in the grocery store, and we feel our shoulders go up. Once we see that, we take a breath and relax our shoulders. That is a kind of letting go.

Becoming aware of all the ordinary letting goes throughout the day builds momentum and familiarity. Just like with thinking, emotions, the body, and even breathing, we want to become familiar with the workings of letting go: how it works, how we do it, where we're good at it, where it's hard. We want to become familiar with the different ways it is done – sometimes with the shoulders, the clenching of the jaws, a clenching in the mind, a gripping of ideas and thoughts.

You're having a conversation, and you find yourself leaning forward, so eager to say something that you almost don't hear the person anymore. You feel a little frustration, "Can't they stop talking, I want to speak." You're caught. Seeing that you're not really listening or that it's disrespectful to interrupt them, perhaps there can be a wise letting go that happens. So we start to be mindful of how we let go in simple, ordinary ways, and that will support doing it with challenges in life. That builds up a muscle of familiarity, understanding, and wisdom around letting go.

Today, for the meditation, I suggested that letting be is one of the movements or actions in the family of letting go. In one way, letting be follows naturally from mindfulness. Maybe it's a simple next step. In another way, letting be is a very advanced practice. If there is a really strong mindfulness, we can just let be.

I want to emphasize letting be today because it's easy for people to think that letting go is a depressing teaching, especially when they hear teachings on it from Buddhist teachers. People may think: "Letting go means we have to let go of the good things in life. We become less. Why can't we have all the things we want?" Or, "Now I have to become a monastic or a hermit because they're emphasizing letting go of everything."

Because some people react strongly to the teachings of letting go, I thought it might be nice in the guided meditation to begin with letting be. You're allowed to have everything. You're allowed to be exactly who you are. But we can discover letting be in some profound way. There's a powerful, respectful way of letting things be just as they are.

Letting things be as they are is not holding on, clinging, wanting, or pushing. Letting be is stepping back and seeing: "Oh, that's how it is. Okay, let me just watch this now. Let it be and let's watch it. Let's be with it. Watching something in the mind's eye has a powerful effect on something. It's like the sun shining on a young plant in the garden. The sun allows it to grow. This watching with mindfulness – letting it be and watching – is like the sun shining on things. We tend to be less invested in the things that are unwise to do and be. Things that are wise to do tend to grow in the sun of

awareness. So it's a powerful thing to just let it be. This is not ignoring it – we let it be and see it clearly.

I think the capacity to let something be is part of the family of letting go because it is a kind of letting go. It's letting go of the ongoing, incessant involvement: gnawing at something, picking at something, holding something, investing ourselves in something, trying to push away or pull away from something.

Letting be is sitting still metaphorically, and having the ability to be present and kindly, lovingly look something right in the eye: “I see you. I see what this is. In the moment, it's just a thought. In the moment, it's just someone angry at me. In the moment, it's just my fear.” There are times when letting be is appropriate – not always, of course. We are building a muscle of learning how to be in this way – just look at it and be with it. And there is something powerful that begins to happen.

In the deeper areas of vipassana practice, the capacity to let things be becomes more and more important. To no longer be the agent of change, but to let things be and allow ourselves to be the subject of change. Allow change to happen. Allow letting go and release to happen. The deepest, fullest kind of letting go that we do in Buddhist practice is not something we can do. It's something that happens on its own when we have really learned the full maturity of letting something be.

My friends, thank you. I look forward to this week exploring different aspects of mindful letting go.