

Dharmette: The Lightness of Letting Go

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 15th, 2015

A very central practice in Buddhism – without which there would probably be no Buddhism – is the practice of letting go. It is a practice that can be quite challenging – a practice which people can appropriately have reservations about. It can be done poorly. Even so, it is one of the great practices in Buddhism, because in letting go, we find our freedom.

Suzuki Roshi is supposed to have said that letting go is accepting that things go away. That is one aspect of letting go. That's how things are. Some of you are already experiencing getting older, and there are probably capacities you had when you were you were younger that are not so prominent any more. They are going. So you can suffer around that by holding on to something, but instead of fighting old age, letting go has an aspect of accepting the way things are.

One of the things I learned about letting go, is that it is healthy when done appropriately. When you've let go of something, there should be some joy. Maybe 'joy' is too strong of a word, but perhaps it will feel like lightness – like, "Wow! What a relief to let go."

I did a lot of letting go during my practice, and I thought I was really doing it. I thought I was letting go of things, when actually what I really was doing ended up being neutral. I was letting go, and I wasn't suffering anymore, so that was good, but I wasn't happy. I was neutral. I learned that if I am neutral in letting go, I have not really let go. There's still something. And generally what would happen to me was that the something would come back and bite me later. Somehow in the background, it was still operating. So, a nice principle is that if there is no joy, you have not really let go.

What can you let go of so that you are not only free from what you are clinging to, but there's some joy or appreciation in that letting go? One way this happens is when you understand what the holding on is like – what the gripping is like. You can study and be aware of what you are holding onto, but you can also become aware of what the gripping is like – the tightening of the mind, the obsessiveness of the mind, the contraction of attention, the fear that might be there. There are many ways in which holding on can function. And you begin to feel the cost – the texture – of clinging, holding on, grasping, resisting. Then when you do let go, you can feel how good it is for that to go away, “Ah! I'm not grasping any more. That feels good. A little bit of joy. Nice feelings. I'm not so tight anymore. Not fighting something so much anymore.”

It is good to know about the thing you are grasping, and to have some wisdom about it. How grasping is not really healthy for you or for other people. If it is just a policy that it's good to let go and be a card carrying Buddhist, then just let go and perhaps there will be limited wisdom. Without wisdom, letting go can be dangerous.

Some people have to take time to get to know what it is that is going on. What are you holding on to, or are attached to? What is the nature of the attachment? How are you attached? Can you understand it better?

Some things we must let go of are healthy. How do you feel about letting go of healthy things? In this society many people have a lot of choice, a lot of options. We probably have more choices in what we do, or buy, or the activities we participate in than most people in human history. A lot of these are good things to do. You can volunteer; you can exercise; you can eat healthily, and read spiritual books, and meditate, and spend time with friends, and come to IMC... The list goes on and on – all these great things you can do. But a mature life realizes it is not healthy if you do all of them. So sometimes you have to let go even of good things. Be wise about it. Realize that by doing *all* these things, you are growing thin and exhausting yourself. There needs to be wisdom about it. OK, I have got to do less. One

more dharma activity is not healthy. Is not dharmic. We must let go a little bit.

In the letting go do we feel our betterment? Is it better for me, or better for the others I am with? Is there some appreciation for the value of it?

Letting go is not a good thing to do just as a policy. It needs to have wisdom as part of it. Part of the wisdom I would suggest to you – the little protection for it all – is to pay attention and look for joy. Are you lighter? Are your days a little easier? If there some ease that comes from letting go, then it is more likely to serve you well. If you don't feel a tiny bit of joy in letting go, watch out! You probably have not let go. You only think you have, but you haven't really.

Those are my thoughts today.