

Mindful Letting Go (2 of 5) Wise Letting Go

September 22, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

clinging, addiction, suffering, striker, Seven Factors of Awakening

Gil Fronsdal

For this second talk on mindful letting go, I want to emphasize the importance of wisdom – that we let go with wisdom, with a deeper understanding. Sometimes people hear teachings on letting go, and they hold it up idealistically. They hold it as something that we're supposed to do with everything – to let go of everything, be a renunciant. There can be foolish letting go. There can be letting go of the wrong things. There can be letting go of things that are perfectly fine to have, but there's an attitude that the things might be wrong or bad. Or there's an idea that letting go is better.

There are two general areas of wisdom in terms of letting go. One is to understand something about what we are letting go of – the nature of what we're letting go of. The second is what we are letting go into – what we

are allowing by letting go. So one is to understand the dangers of clinging and the other is to understand the benefits of letting go.

The dangers of clinging are twofold. Sometimes we cling to things that are harmful themselves. For example, there may be a strong addiction to alcohol. To keep acting on alcohol is extremely damaging, not only to the person who is an alcoholic but also to their family and other people around them.

I meet lots of people coming to meditation retreats who talk about their personal challenges and suffering. One of the common themes is growing up in a family where one of the family members is an alcoholic. The behavior that comes out of alcoholism damages ourselves and others. The difficulty, on the surface, is the clinging to alcohol. Sometimes the wisest thing to do is to let go of the alcohol, the object of the addiction. Remove ourselves from it; remove it from us. So sometimes the danger is what we are clinging and holding on to. We see wisely, “Oh, this is damaging, this is painful.” That is a kind of wisdom. We really understand why it’s not healthy for us.

The other danger of clinging is that the act of clinging is a kind of suffering. The clinging itself may be less of a suffering than the consequences of addiction, but there clearly is a loss of freedom, an inner pain, a contraction

that comes from clinging. So here, it's not necessarily letting go of things but rather letting go of the clinging.

Someone could cling to something quite beneficial and good in and of itself. Someone could cling to having a nutritious diet. I've seen people who are really consumed with healthy food – almost like an addiction – and the clinging, the grasping, the holding on for dear life has not served them well. What is needed here is not letting go of healthy food. What we let go of is the drivenness and compulsivity for healthy food.

Some Buddhist teachers will say that letting go is not letting go of things, but rather, letting go of our clinging to things. I'm very fond of pointing out that there are two ways of letting go of a striker. One way would be to let the striker drop, and then it might fall like it just did on my ankle and hurt a little bit. You could cause damage by letting go in the wrong way. The other way of letting go is that I can let go of the grasping to the striker and it ends up like this [striker resting in the palm of an open hand]. I still have the striker, but I'm holding it gently and openly. I'm not clinging to it.

We can understand the pain and the tightness of what clinging is like and its shortcomings. Clinging to the striker limits the sensitivity and availability of the soft, sensitive part of the hand to feel what's going on in the world, to connect to it, and to do other things with it. So

when I'm grasping, I'm limited. When the hand is holding the striker this way [striker resting in the palm of an open hand] – the clinging is let go of, and I'm not as limited. There's more I can do, including putting something down and picking it up when it's needed.

So one form of wisdom is understanding the dangers of clinging – the danger of some of the things that we cling to, and the danger of the clinging itself (how it limits us and causes pain). That can give ample reasons for us to let go. We understand well: “Oh yes, I need to let go. I have to let go. It's important to let go.” But still, even with that wisdom, some people find that it is hard to let go. There may be fear to let go. The compulsion and drivenness may be quite strong.

The other form of wisdom is to understand the benefits of letting go. We can also let go into something. Like with the example of the striker, when the hand opens, it is open to greater sensitivity. We are available to feel and be in contact with the world in a much richer and deeper way when our hand is open than when our hand is always clenched. So we let go into sensitivity, into availability, into a kind of presence that is not possible if we're contracted in clinging.

We can also understand, especially with more and more Buddhist practice or other spiritual practice, there is a difference between living on the surface of life and living

more deeply connected to the wellsprings of life. I like to call this the inner life. Some people in the modern West might call it the soul. Some Buddhists might call it the heart, *citta* – really being connected to the heart.

If we spend our days pursuing pleasure, getting a massage, eating tasty food, and other kinds of sensual pleasures, it might feel good, but that's more surface. To really feel deep contentment, peacefulness, and warmth, a kind of three-dimensional, fully embodied sense of the inner life, the full life, we have to open up to what's deeper inside of us, the quality of our inner life.

Only we can be the caretakers of that inner life. We have to discover it and learn what it is. That is a lot of what the contemplative life is about. I'm using the word "contemplative" today to imply something much bigger than simply a mindful life. A mindful life for some people is still a life on the surface, just being mindful of eating the raisin or something. A contemplative life is mindfulness that really wakes up the inner sensibility and touches into the quality of our inner life.

We can realize that when we let go, we also let go into a deeper connection to the present moment. We can let go into peace, into feelings of contentment, joy, happiness, well-being, goodwill, a sense of rightness ("this is true"). It's possible to let go and feel our

sadness and grief, but as painful as that is, it feels right. There's a rightness to feel this grief: "Of course, I feel grief given what's happened." We can let go into – I don't know, my words fail me – the rightness of grief. Our strong emotions might not seem to be contemplative in nature, but they are true. We can let go into the trueness of them.

When we let go into what is actually here, we find our way. Then life is a whole different thing. So we can let go into having greater clarity. We can let go into having more awareness because clinging interferes with it. We can let go into seeing more clearly what's actually happening, taking time to look and see. We can let go into a sense of inner vitality and engagement. We can let go into joy, delight, and happiness. We can let go into calm and peacefulness. We can let go into concentration. Classically in Theravadan Buddhism – I don't know if it is classical but maybe a long, popular idea – the primary means for developing *samādhi* is just letting go, letting go deeply into a natural settledness, openness, and focus. There's letting go into equanimity, into a serenity, a peace, a non-reactivity. And those are called the Seven Factors of Awakening.

The Seven Factors of Awakening can be available in small ways and big ways. This is part of the richness of our inner life. As we practice, we slowly begin to get inklings of these Seven Factors of Awakening. We get

inklings of the *brahmavihāras*: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity.

We get inklings of wisdom and understanding. We can understand how dangerous it is to be apart from that – to not be wise, to not be connected to mindfulness. And we can understand the benefits of being connected to mindfulness. So we can let go, not to diminish ourselves, but to enhance ourselves. We let go to avoid dangers and to benefit ourselves. I like to think that letting go is really a way to enhance the goodness, strength, and beauty of our inner life.

So, developing wisdom around letting go. Mindful letting go can be synonymous with wise letting go. If someone asks you to let go or you consider letting go of something, ask yourself: “Is it wise? What is wise? First, let’s become wise about it before I let go.” Thank you and look forward to tomorrow.