

Mindfulness of Breathing(6 of 7) Letting Go

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In the meditation we just did, I was connecting breathing with the idea of letting go. Letting go stands at the heart of the liberation teachings of Buddhism.

It is easy to misunderstand the idea of letting go. We can get a different flavor from it when we realize that the Buddha uses many different words for “letting go.” But a good number of those words are closely related to the meaning of “giving” or “generosity.” We use “letting go” that way a little in English, with the idea of giving up.

Giving up can mean kind of a surrender. Colloquially, surrendering often means not having any hope. But I believe it originally meant “offering something up to the altar.” There's something sacred about handing off or giving up. It is something we do with empowerment, with strength, with purpose. It is not a diminishment of us or a loss of anything.

So the idea of giving and generosity implies that letting go is something very wholesome and good. We get a sense of that when we realize that when we let go fully, we're more fresh and available to receive. We can be attentive and see clearly without bias and prejudice and without the filter of our wanting and not-wanting, our resentments, our attractions, and our repulsions. We can be really there to see and experience what's there.

There is an analogy using breathing for letting go. As we exhale, we're relaxing and letting go, and then we're available to inhale. Breathing is so intimately connected to all the other aspects of how we live our lives, partly because we adjust our breath depending on how much energy we need to do things. We engage our breath in the ways that best support us in times of danger and fear and times of joy and activity. So there is a constant modulation in the movement of the breathing.

But we also modulate the breath when we have emotional reactions and desires about things that have nothing to do with the present moment. The breath is constantly engaging in different ways.

We can learn, especially in meditation, to have an easeful, relaxed breath. Then in that easeful breath, we can see that when the breath gets held, we're probably attached to something, holding onto something, resisting something, or concerned about something. The more easeful and relaxed the breathing is, the more we can notice when things shift.

Sometimes in meditation, the breathing gets very, very quiet and still. Then, lo and behold, we'll have some kind of thought about some person that we have trouble with. Now we can feel the breathing has changed. It has gotten more active and we breathe more fully because of the shift of our concerns. The breathing is an indicator of what has shifted in our minds and hearts.

Connecting breathing with letting go of what we're holding onto can be quite profound. Doing this also reminds us that letting go is not an end in itself. We also let go so we can be available to see things as they arise. Things are constantly beginning and ending, arising and disappearing, much more than usually meets the eye – or better, meets the thoughts.

When we're thinking about things, judging them, having ideas about them, or conceptualizing them, we tend to add more continuity to present moment experience than there actually is in the river of time, the actual direct moment of experience. The more we can relax and soften the conceptual, story-making mind, and the more we can live in the present moment, the more we can see how much and fully things are constantly changing and moving.

The ability to be fresh for the next moment is a phenomenal gift to ourselves and the world around us. We can see that in small ways, like when we see a friend after some time, and rather than meeting the friend fresh, we meet the friend with our ideas of who the friend is and how it's supposed to be based on how we were in the past.

I've made mistakes with friends when I saw them and blurted something out to them without being available to see what was new. I remember once it turned out that my friend's best friend had just died in the last 24 hours. I didn't take the time to be there fresh and open to find out where the person was because I was continuing the momentum of our conversations and our way of being together in the past.

The idea is to be available and fresh. The Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi defined mindfulness in a kind of Zen way,

his way maybe, as a “readiness of mind” – to be ready for whatever comes, whatever arises. Suzuki Roshi also said that with letting go, we're not really letting go. He talked about allowing things to go, in that things don't want to stay unless we hold on to them and cling. It's a very generous thing to just allow things to go.

With certain emotions and thoughts, we can see that they linger because we're involved with them. We're holding on to them. We're picking them up. We're debating them, engaging them, planning them, fantasizing about them. But if we can just let go of the ways in which we're actively involved in holding on, reacting to them, and even pushing them away, a lot of these things in the mind don't have a lot of continuity power by themselves. We allow them to go when they're ready to go.

Probably many of you know this – I keep forgetting the exact length of time – researchers of emotions in the last 20 years have said that if you leave an emotion alone, it doesn't last more than a minute or two. For emotions to last longer, there has to be something fueling them, some involvement with them. It's kind of a challenging and disturbing idea that the difficult emotions we have are sometimes being perpetuated by some kind of involvement we have.

But this does point to the idea that at least some emotions continue because of our involvement. Then we can learn to let go of that involvement. We can respect the emotion and allow it to have its own life. If it's not being fed, the emotion will either fade away or morph and change into something else. It's very respectful to allow this inner life to keep arising and unfolding.

There's a lot of wisdom in our inner life that is limited when we're holding onto things and involved in blocking the new arising of things, the new appearing of things. The idea of letting go is not a diminishment of who we are. I would say that it's an enhancement of who we are. It allows some inner strength, vitality, wisdom, intelligence, and compassion – the best in us – to start appearing. What's worse in us tends to be a problem when we hold onto it, cling to it, and reinforce it.

The idea of just letting go and being available for what arises is a beautiful thing. Our breathing is our companion and friend in this regard because we can see how we're held in how the breathing has shifted and changed. Maybe the breathing has become more chest breathing than belly breathing, or it has become faster, or it's held in check in all kinds of subtle ways.

But come back to the capacity for an easeful breath. In that easeful breath (or close to it), let go.

One healthy habit you can develop is to really be there for the exhale. This can help you let go of what you're holding onto, help you relax, help you settle, and help you de-stress. Breathe, breathe, breathe. Breathing is such a wonderful and powerful friend. It's well worth taking the time to learn the skill of breathing. It is not always easy, but it's a great thing.

We have one more day. Some of you are meditating a lot today, on retreat, and others of you online are living your lives. Today you might experiment, when it seems appropriate, with just letting go of any ways in which you're holding on. Suzuki Roshi also said, "We're not letting go of things, we're letting go of the holding on to things, the clinging to things."

The metaphor I like to use for that is clinging to this striker, holding, gripping it tightly for dear life. When I realize how much it hurts to grip and how limited that life is, I could let go of it this way – I can just drop it. If I just let it fall on the podium here it would make a big, not-so-nice sound probably.

But there is another way of letting something go. We can release it and let go but still hold it in our hands. Letting go doesn't require something to disappear. Holding in this way in the open hand, there is an availability and allowance for things to do what they do. If the striker is actually a butterfly, it'll fly away. Or if it's a

good thing to have, maybe it'll stay there. In the open hand, something new and useful will come. The open hand is available this way.

So experiment, play around with it, and stretch yourself in this world of letting go. Take some chances today to let go and see what it's like to meet anybody you meet or anybody you communicate with. What happens if you really let go before you start engaging with someone? Can you be available to see them in a fresh new way? I'm suggesting this experiment with letting go so that you might be ready for what will follow tomorrow morning. May this be a happy day for you – happy in letting go. Thank you.