

# Letting Go Again

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Tonight's topic is Letting Go Again. When we talk about letting go, or renunciation, it's about ending our clinging to the causes of misery, or *dukkha*. By letting go, we free ourselves of what makes us unhappy.

The first thing we need to know – and remember – about *dukkha* is that it's home-made. We create our own *dukkha*, often translated as suffering. But suffering is usually thought of as circumstantial, and so we say, "their house burned down and they lost everything," to convey suffering.

*Dukkha*, in contrast, isn't caused by external events. It's caused by our *reactions to* external events. Maybe there were some special items in that house that the owner pines for even after many years.

So, *dukkha* can be provoked by thoughts – true, false or irrelevant – that cross our minds. The point is, *dukkha* is an inside job. We make it, we live with it. However, we also need to remember no one should be blamed for it. *Dukkha* should be met with compassion.

Someone recently described an acquaintance who believed Covid-19 was a hoax and that getting the vaccination would make him grow a third arm. He seemed to believe the whole pandemic was something cooked up by evil liberals for mysterious reasons.

My friend summed up where this guy was coming from. "He's totally suspicious," she said. "When he steps outside his house, he's looking around for what's going to hurt him."

This is a case of a mind that constantly generates *dukkha* and, as a result, fosters the causes of suffering. He's like a rock in the river that everyone else has to steer around. He may never realize that his extreme suspiciousness is so toxic to himself and others.

We can cling to all sorts of things: what we want, our fears of what we don't want, our anger and hatred that we didn't get what we wanted. I knew a young woman whose father taught her to be angry. The two of them considered anger as their primary defense mechanism. Yet it didn't really defend them from much of anything.

They always had "anger hangovers," and the scenes they created alienated people who might otherwise have helped them. Totally entangled in criminal charges, this woman was miserable, but I could not convince her that anger was not her friend, but her tormentor. She couldn't begin to imagine letting it go of it.

Renunciation is the *willingness* to let go of something. It's something we need to hold on to because letting go of harmful states of mind can take quite a while. It is hardly ever instantaneous. It's not like letting go of a rock we're holding with our hand turned down, but more like one we're holding with our palm turned up.

Yes, we open our fingers but the rock hasn't dropped away. It's still in our hand. I think of the mental formations – or fabrications – that underlie our clinging as *sticky*. We get stuck to them, like that young woman and her anger. She believed she was always a victim and just raged about it.

I used to have an attitude that other drivers had bad intentions toward me when they did things I didn't like. It wasn't really conscious. It took me years to fully uncover and understand this underlying attitude. I didn't even realize that I was taking personally things that could be motivated by all sorts of things other than me.

Once I recognized this mental habit of resenting other drivers, I could see it was causing me a lot more distress than they probably felt. There's a saying that resentment is like taking poison and expecting the other person to die. I was poisoning myself.

For years, I worked on letting go of this attitude and reaction pattern. There would be periods when I could drive more peacefully than before. But the mental reactions kept coming back, though less intensely. Then, one day, I noticed that driving just wasn't stressful anymore. But it was a long process to get there.

The Buddha compared our clinging to holding onto a piece of hot coal. Maybe it's covered in ash and we don't feel it until we hold it tight. It is by repeatedly watching a mental habit cause us distress that we alter our conditioning. It's often a slow process with the coal feeling hotter as we continue to be aware of it.

Once we have seen and felt how this mental pattern leads to our suffering, something shifts on its own. The burned hand insists on dropping the coal. Something inside us, perhaps our capacity to love, lets go of this harmful pattern of thought and behavior. Rarely does a habit disappear once we've simply decided to let it go.

The whole process of letting go requires mindfulness. Even after the habit has faded, we need to be alert to its coming back and that takes mindfulness. How do we develop this level of mindfulness?

Well, we develop it every time we meditate and focus on something, like the breath or other sensations. Just remember, *holding* that focus is *not the point* in developing mindfulness. The point is to keep coming back to that focus after thoughts interrupt it.

By coming back to that focus, we're *letting go* of those interrupting thoughts. That's the heart of mindfulness and of Buddhist practice. Let go. Let go again. And again. Gil Fronsdal says every time we let go, we get lighter. It's the process of enlightenment.

Letting go is a way we reward ourselves for caring about our happiness. It is a process. Often letting go can be a tedious and uncomfortable process of confronting the truth of our clinging to mental habits, our cravings and aversions.

In this process, we spend a lot of time paying close, compassionate attention to our discomfort and its causes. To do this there *has to be* compassion. We need to stay in touch with the love that motivates us to be free. The love for ourselves.

If instead we're motivated by aversion to our dukkha, we prolong the process of letting go of a habit and of its causes. Aversion can't be undone by aversion, but only by love. As the Buddha said in the Dhammapada, this is an ancient and immutable law.

We may very well need lots of love to plod through the process of letting go of harmful habits. I have a low-grade habit that doesn't cause very much harm, but it's persistent. It may be rooted in very early conditioning. I chew on the inside of my mouth.

I've had this habit on and off for more than half a century. I've tried to bludgeon it away, but it's always come back. Lately I've used my own advice. I say, "Please don't do that," and "thanks for stopping."

I hear a lot of people say they've been working on letting go of patterns of thought or behavior but the patterns won't go away. "How can I *get rid* of this?" they ask. Pushing things away invites them to push back.

It also does us harm. When we get mad at ourselves for repeating a habit, our self-esteem takes a hit. The aversion we're feeling, in itself, is an unpleasant form of dukkha. So it's much better to approach letting go with love.

This turnaround can be transformative. If we accept ourselves just as we are in the moment when we are craving chocolate or stewing over an old resentment, the whole process of letting go of mental habit softens. It becomes easier. Our sense of self loses the rigidity that comes from clinging.

In that moment, we get a chance to glimpse the true fluidity of our selves, and that's a great opportunity. That is a powerful insight I call the express elevator to letting go. Instead of chipping away at harmful habits, this insight can take us directly to freedom from them.

All our clinging comes from a misunderstanding of who and what we are, which leads to self-referencing greed and aversion. It's what makes us think, "I want this, and I hate that." Our cravings and dislikes depend on that "I."

When we see ourselves not as rigid and separate selves but fluid processes, then craving and hate lose their power. When I practice letting go of this chewing habit by saying "please and thank you," what am I saying that to? Well, that doesn't matter. We just need to know it's loving and it works.

Generosity, kindness and mindfulness are also vital. Practicing generosity helps us learn to let go in a loving way. When we give dana we're not just letting go of some money, we're also acting on appreciation of the dharma and the sangha that has brought it to us.

Being kind to ourselves helps us recognize a harmful mental or behavioral habit that would otherwise remain hidden to us. Then mindfulness can let us see how our minds produce it. And we can address the underlying cause of our clinging with wisdom.

I say, "thank you," when I notice the urge to nibble my lip and don't actually do it. Acceptance lets me meet the urge with kindness. Being mindful at that moment allows the urge dissolve, like thoughts so often dissolve during meditation at the moment we realize we've been lost in them.

We may cause our own dukkha, but "we" aren't to blame for it. Our minds have a built-in tendency to desire and dislike. It's call *vedana* in Pali. This innate tendency gets stronger each time we give in to it, and over time that harmless desire or dislike grows into craving and aversion.

Through the lens of acceptance and kindness we can explore the dukkha caused by our clinging. This gives us a sense of why we crave or hate any specific thing. Here's where mindfulness and psychotherapy overlap. It's rich with opportunities for insight, and freedom.

Having mentioned how built-in our liking or not liking things is, I should explain that as living animals we need *vedana*. We need to be drawn to things that are good for us and avoid those that are harmful. Wild animals learn this partly by watching their elders, partly by the foul taste of toxic plants or by getting sick from them.

We humans are the same, but in today's developed world we have so many "hidden poisons" available to us. This has led, for example, to the obesity epidemic, because junk food is cheap, quick and it tastes good.

Our culture of abundance has also led to the drug epidemic. So much of this comes from inequities in wealth. Workers on cocoa farms may not be able to afford to eat chocolate, while I have to be quite disciplined to eat just a little of it.

It's worth thinking about how we tell what's good for us or not, because a lot of desires or aversions support our basic wellbeing. We don't want to break good habits; maybe we should establish more of them. We just want the understanding and the tools to free ourselves from the mind states and behaviors that harm us.

So, I wish you the best in dealing with the mental tendencies that cause dukkha for you. May you engage with them in a loving and accepting, but determined way. If they seem to have faded but then come back, don't be too discouraged. Just let go again.

Thank you