



Letting Go

Robert Hodge

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In the Buddha's Prescription for Happiness (the Eightfold Path), in the second step, Skillful Intention, he stated three skillful intentions to adopt: letting go, practicing loving-kindness and practicing compassion.ⁱ We will explore the first intention: Letting Go.

What is letting go and what do we let go of?

Letting go is about abandoning our attachments (clinging). In the third principle of suffering, the Buddha stated that when we let go of clinging, suffering ceases.

Craving, a strong desire for something, leads to clinging, to remain attached. We want something (craving) and we are obsessed to the extent that we can't let go of what we want (clinging). It manifests as a bodily feeling either pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. We have to be able to recognize these feelings in the body.

Attachment is the act of grasping at and clinging to various aspects of life. **Detachment** is the opposite of attachment. It is pushing away or denying our desires and tendency to cling. **Non-attachment** is living from a place of presence, where we honor each experience (including our desires), without grasping or resisting what is occurring. It has the quality of spaciousness and it reflects the ability to live in the present moment.ⁱⁱ

S.N. Goenka states: "The Buddha was the foremost scientist of mind and matter (nama and rupa). What makes him a peerless scientist is his discovery that tanha, or craving, and by extension, aversion—arises from vedana, or sensation on the body.....Buddha discovered that everything that arises in the mind arises with the sensations on the body and that these sensations are the material we have to work with."ⁱⁱⁱ

Bhante Gunaratana notes: "Letting go is the opposite of desire or attachment. Think of it as generosity in the highest sense. Along the Buddha's path, we will have the opportunity to give away or let go of everything that holds us back from our goal of the highest happiness— possessions, people, beliefs and opinions, even our attachment to our own mind and body.

When people hear this, they sometimes start to worry. They think that to follow the Buddha's teachings they have to give everything away and join a monastery. Though becoming a monk or a nun is indeed one way of practicing generosity, most people can let go in the midst of busy, family-centered lives. What we need to reject is not the things we have, or our family and friends, but rather our mistaken

sense that these are our possessions. **We need to let go of our habit of clinging to the people and the material things in our lives and to our ideas, beliefs, and opinions.**^{iv}

Gesshin Claire Greenwood notes: “The mistake I made along the way was believing that renunciation (letting go) is supposed to hurt. And I’ve actually heard this message echoed in dharma centers in the West as well as Zen monasteries in Japan.

But renunciation is not supposed to hurt. It’s supposed to clear away the psychological clutter in our lives that get in the way of joy.

In the noble eightfold path, “right intention” or “right thought” means the intention to renounce, the intention of goodwill, and the intention of harmlessness. The key mistake I made with renunciation during my monastic career was the belief that renunciation can be compelled from the outside in, rather than the inside out. I believed I could will myself to renounce. **But renunciation comes from understanding, not force.**^v

What do we need to understand about clinging? Why do we cling?

We need to decide to let go of what we are clinging to, be it possessions, people, beliefs and opinions, even our attachment to our own mind and body. We will discuss how to let go later.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu notes: “For all the subtlety of his teachings, the Buddha had a simple test for measuring wisdom. You’re wise, he said, to the extent that you can get yourself to do things you don’t like doing but know will result in happiness, and to refrain from things you like doing but know will result in pain and harm.

He derived this standard for wisdom from his insight into the radical importance of intentional action in shaping our experience of happiness and sorrow, pleasure and pain. With action so important and yet so frequently misguided, wisdom has to be tactical, strategic, in fostering actions that are truly beneficial. **It has to outwit short-sighted preferences to yield a happiness that lasts.**

Because the Buddha viewed all issues of experience, from the gross to the subtle, in terms of intentional actions and their results, his tactical standard for wisdom applies to all levels as well, from the wisdom of simple generosity to the wisdom of emptiness and ultimate Awakening. Wisdom on all levels is wise because it works. It makes a difference in what you do and the happiness that results. **And to work, it requires integrity: the willingness to look honestly at the results of your actions, to admit when you’ve caused harm, and to change your ways so that you won’t make the same mistake again.**

What’s striking about this standard for wisdom is how direct and down to earth it is. This might come as a surprise, for most of us don’t think of Buddhist wisdom as so commonsensical and straightforward. Instead, the phrase “Buddhist wisdom” conjures up teachings more abstract and paradoxical, flying in the face of common sense—emptiness being a prime example. Emptiness, we’re told, means that nothing has any inherent existence. In other words, on an ultimate level, things aren’t what we conventionally think of as “things.” They’re processes that are in no way separate from all the other processes on which they depend. This is a philosophically sophisticated idea that’s fascinating to ponder,

but it doesn't provide much obvious help in getting you up early on a cold morning to meditate nor in convincing you to give up a destructive addiction.

For example, if you're addicted to alcohol, it's not because you feel that the alcohol has any inherent existence. It's because, in your calculation, the immediate pleasure derived from the alcohol outweighs the long-term damage it's doing to your life. This is a general principle: attachment and addiction are not metaphysical problems. They're tactical ones. **We're attached to things and actions, not because of what we think they are, but because of what we think they can do for our happiness. If we keep overestimating the pleasure and underestimating the pain they bring, we stay attached to them regardless of what, in an ultimate sense, we understand them to be.**

Because the problem is tactical, the solution has to be tactical as well. The cure for addiction and attachment lies in retraining your imagination and your intentions through expanding your sense of the power of your actions and the possible happiness you can achieve. This means learning to become more honest and sensitive to your actions and their consequences, at the same time allowing yourself to imagine and master alternative routes to greater happiness with fewer drawbacks. Metaphysical views may sometimes enter into the equation, but at most they're only secondary. Many times they're irrelevant. Even if you were to see the alcohol and its pleasure as lacking inherent existence, you'd still go for the pleasure as long as you saw it as outweighing the damage. Sometimes ideas of metaphysical emptiness can actually be harmful. If you start focusing on how the damage of drinking—and the people damaged by your drinking—are empty of inherent existence, you could develop a rationale for continuing to drink. So the teaching on metaphysical emptiness wouldn't seem to pass the Buddha's own test for wisdom.^{vi}

What is tactical? Strategy describes the destination and how you are going to get there, and tactics describe the specific actions you are going to take along the way. For example, the strategy is to gain freedom by adopting the skillful intention of letting go. The tactic is to specifically let go of what you attached to.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu addresses this in his article, *The Integrity of Emptiness*:

1. The Buddha had a simple test for measuring wisdom
 - a. You're wise
 - i. if you can get yourself to do things you don't like doing but know will result in happiness
 - ii. refrain from things you like doing but know will result in pain and harm.
 - iii. This relates to the Five Precepts
 - b. Wisdom has to be tactical (specific) and strategic (overall goal) to foster beneficial (skillful) actions and avoid clinging to unskillful ones.
 - c. **We have to have the wisdom to outwit short-sighted preferences to yield a happiness that lasts.**
 - d. **And to work, we have to have integrity: the willingness to look honestly at the results of our actions, to admit when we've caused harm, and to change our ways so that we won't make the same mistake again.**

- e. This wisdom is down to earth and can help you in getting you up early on a cold morning to meditate and convincing you to give up a destructive addiction.
- f. For example, if you're addicted to alcohol, it's not because you feel that the alcohol has any inherent existence. It's because, in your calculation, the immediate pleasure derived from the alcohol outweighs the long-term damage it's doing to your life. This is a general principle: attachment and addiction are not metaphysical problems. They're tactical ones.
- g. **We're attached to things and actions, not because of what we think they are, but because of what we think they can do for our happiness. If we keep overestimating the pleasure and underestimating the pain they bring, we stay attached to them regardless of what, in an ultimate sense, we understand them to be.**

In order to get in touch with your clinging, you can practice the Letting Go Contemplation. This is a very powerful contemplation which may bring up a lot of strong emotions. It leads to a greater realization of non-attachment.

Letting Go Contemplation

Attachment is the act of grasping at and clinging to various aspects of life. **Detachment** is the opposite of attachment. It is pushing away or denying our desires and tendency to cling. **Non-attachment** is living from a place of presence, where we honor each experience (including our desires), without grasping or resisting what is occurring. It has the quality of spaciousness and it reflects the ability to live in the present moment.

In this contemplation, we experience letting go of our attachment to the various aspects of life to which we normally cling. We are not trying to cultivate detachment. We want to learn how to live spontaneously, trusting life as it arises from moment-to-moment. This is not possible as long as we cling to anything, no matter how precious it appears to be.

Find a safe and quiet place where you will be undisturbed for at least an hour. Have a box of tissues handy.

1. On the index cards, write the 10 most important things to you in your life. Only write one entry per card. For example, you can write a child's name on a card, the name of your significant other, your health, your eyesight, your body, your house, your financial nest-egg, a specific piece of art, an heirloom, the ability to travel, your career, your memory, your intelligence, music, strength, creative ability, and so forth. Remember, only one entry per card. (If you believe in future lives, only write those things on the cards that you believe that you will not have with you in the next life.)

2. Order the cards from the LEAST to the MOST important. In other words, the least important will be on top of the stack and the most important will be on the bottom of the stack. For example, you may have a child's name first, your health second, your house third, etc. Of course, there is no "right" order – it is totally subjective. Some people have difficulty ordering their children, thinking, "I love them all the same." If you honestly feel you have no preferences, use their birth order.

3. Imagine as clearly as possible that you are in the process of dying. It can be from cancer, an accident, or even old age. You have very little time left.

4. After your dying process becomes clear in your mind, take the top index card in your hand (the one that is least important to you).

5. Say good-bye to that possession, experience or person, knowing that you will never encounter that circumstance or individual again. Fully drop into the experience, moving beyond a mere intellectual level of process. Notice the feeling in your body. Is it unpleasant, pleasant, or neither unpleasant nor pleasant?

6. When you have said your good-bye, rip up the card to signify that you have let it go, and throw the torn up card in the garbage can.

7. After ripping up the card, spend some time realizing that you are still whole and complete without that person or experience in your life. Keep working at it until you know that your well-being and serenity does not depend on what you no longer have.

8. Repeat the process with the remaining cards until you have completed the sequence with all ten cards.

You will likely realize that this process becomes more difficult with the last few cards than it was for the first few. You may come to a point where you are unable to say good-bye, to rip up one or more of the cards, or to feel whole and complete without the person or experience that is written on any of the cards. When this occurs, it means that you are still attached. Either keep working at the process or acknowledge that you are unable to let go at this time.

Adapted from Matt Flickstein

Must we abandon clinging to hope?

In our day and age, there are many situations that evoke despair such as the effects of climate change without any major effort to mitigate it or the threat of nuclear war. Do we abandon clinging to hope that these situations will change for the better?

The answer is yes. The definition of hope is a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen. Both clinging to hope and despair must be abandoned.

In his article, All About Change, Thanissaro Bhikkhu notes: “Insight into change teaches us to embrace our experiences without clinging to them—to get the most out of them in the present moment by fully appreciating their intensity, in full knowledge that we will soon have to let them go to embrace whatever comes next.

Insight into change teaches us hope. Because change is built into the nature of things, nothing is inherently fixed, not even our own identity. No matter how bad the situation, anything is possible. We

can do whatever we want to do, create whatever world we want to live in, and become whatever we want to be.”^{vii}

What he is saying is that nothing is fixed, and anything is possible so that we must remain in the present and see what happens. We can certainly have preferences; however, we must not cling to our hope of the outcome. For example, we can say to someone, “I hope you are feeling better.” This expresses our preference, not our certainty on an outcome.

Atisha (980-1052 CE) was an Indian adept who brought to Tibet a systematized approach to bodhicitta (the desire to awaken for the sake of all sentient beings) and loving-kindness, through working with the 59 mind-training (Tib. lojong) slogans. Slogan 28 is Abandon Any Hope of Fruition. According to Judy Lief, “This slogan undercuts our attachment to either success or failure. It is a kind of positive giving up. Abandoning any hope of fruition does not mean abandoning our projects and ambitions. Instead it points to a way of going about things that is present focused rather than fixated on results.”^{viii}

In abandoning hope and despair, we abide in the present.

Letting go and fear

Bhante Gunaratana notes: “When we begin to practice mindfulness of letting go, we often stumble on fear. Fear arises because of an insecure, emotional, or greedy attachment to ideas, concepts, feelings, or physical objects, including our own body. It can also be caused by coming into contact with something that we do not understand or whose outcome is uncertain.”^{ix}

Letting go is really letting go of fear. Fear is the anticipation of what we perceive to be a catastrophic future event such as loss, pain, criticism or disrepute. **Fear causes worry and restlessness.**

The Pali word for restlessness is uddacca which means agitation, excitement or distraction. Restlessness is literally “without rest.” The Pali word for worry is kukkucca which is the mind state of regret (remorse) or anxiety. We worry about what we did or did not do.

Restlessness manifests in the body as a physical sensation described by many as “jumping out of one’s skin. The mind is distracted with various kinds of thoughts. It is truly an inner turmoil with the mind tossed about by agitation. Restlessness can be more subtle posing as distracting thoughts during tasks or in meditation. Worry can manifest as general anxiety about the future. Worry is a form of fear, anticipation or uncertainty about what might happen in the future. Worry can also manifest as guilt, regret or remorse about what we might have done or not done in the past.

In summary, our experience of fear includes:

- Feeling – unpleasant
- Perception – something will go wrong
- Mental Formations – agitation, anxiety, worry, turmoil

Pilar Jennings notes “When most people experience acute fear, the mind gets fuzzy as the blood flows from the brain to the limbs. This is a critical deficit just when we most need to be discerning. But if the

nervous system is trained to recover, we're much better able to keep cool, breathe, and think things through. No fainting, no fleeing, no slapping necessary.

Think about what you fear. As you contemplate the answer, keep breathing, slowly, deeply. The next time you feel afraid, your fears may be strong and real. They may be a response to intense pain. But deep within the body-mind system, there is a reliable and fast-acting remedy. Whether you call it buddhanature, clear seeing, inner strength, or simply a regulated nervous system, the right medicine is available. And then, very fast, it will be over."^x

How do we let go?

To let go, we need to overcome our fear and restlessness and come back to the present. The cause of our fear and restlessness is an imbalance of concentration and energy. Our concentration is too low so that it is difficult to focus our energy. Insufficient concentration means that the excess energy leads to distraction and restlessness. We pay undue attention to our thoughts. In other words, we tend to think too much (mental proliferation).

"Whenever we feel the mind is not settled on the object, not at rest, we can become mindful of the restlessness itself. Notice the physical energies in the body. Notice the difference in the emotional tone between restlessness and worry, so that you can distinguish one from the other. Restlessness feels more scattered; worry feels more anxious. As we become mindful of these states of mind, rather than being lost in them, the mindfulness itself starts to bring the factors of concentration and energy into balance."^{xi}

Zenju Earthlyn Manuel: "I walk on the path fully equipped with all of the emotions of a human being. Meditation assists me in seeing the roots of the emotions, and that all emotions are old. When I notice terror rising to the surface, I note, "I am in the past." Then, I ask, "What is going on here, right now?" When I am angry or enraged, I know to say, "I am terrified of something." I refrain from being ashamed of experiencing these emotions. Only through acknowledging and releasing blind emotions can I experience the inner unencumbered and harmonious being that is always present despite the suffering.

We cannot fully practice any call for liberation without our lives being fully exposed. There is no hiding."^{xii}

Joseph Goldstein says to use your mental zoom lens. "Focus the mind more precisely on a particular object like the breath, or we become quite precise in moving about, strengthening the quality of composure in our movements. Both actions help to calm all the obsessive thinking in the mind."^{xiii}

The Steps of Letting Go

1. Develop through mindfulness the ability to recognize suffering through your bodily feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant).
2. Pause
3. Practice mindfulness of breathing to calm the mind and gain perspective.

4. Investigate to see what are you attached (clinging) to?
5. Concentrate on the fear that arises from the anticipation of loss, pain, criticism or disrepute.
6. Check the perceptions that the fear is causing to arise. Is something really going to go wrong?
Do you really know?
7. Be non-judgmental.
8. Be persistent.
9. Realize that the attachment is not real -it is impermanent, unable to give lasting satisfaction and is of self-less nature.
10. Keep investigating each time this attachment arises.
11. Rest in the joy, tranquility and equanimity that follows.

Summary

1. Craving, a strong desire for something, leads to clinging, to remain attached.
2. Clinging causes suffering.
3. Clinging is a feeling; a bodily sensation.
4. Letting go is the intention to abandon clinging, attachment.
5. Letting go is not detachment but non-attachment, living in the space of presence.
6. Letting go is generosity in the highest sense.
7. We let go of material things, people, ideas, beliefs, and opinions.
8. We cling because we think this will lead to happiness, but it leads instead to suffering.
9. We're attached to things and actions, not because of what we think they are, but because of what we think they can do for our happiness. If we keep overestimating the pleasure and underestimating the pain they bring, we stay attached to them regardless of what, in an ultimate sense, we understand them to be.
10. Abandoning clinging requires the wisdom to do things we don't like doing but know will result in happiness and to refrain from clinging to things we like doing but know will result in pain and harm.
11. We must outwit short-sighted preferences to yield a happiness that lasts.
12. The Letting Go Contemplation is useful for gaining deeper insight in what we cling to.
13. We must abandon clinging to hope and despair. Nothing is permanent; anything can happen.
14. Letting go is dealing with fear, bodily sensations of restlessness and worry.
15. There is a step practice of letting go.

“The path of right intention. Mind is continuous motion, unstoppable. Our minds move from emotional state to emotional state. Everything that arises in expectation is tinged by dissolution and loss, sorrow and anguish. Thoughts appear and vanish, return and again dissolve. Nothing we have learned provides enduring refuge: not belief, not logic, not theory. The path of right intention is the innate power of awareness to open our minds into deeper understanding. We can move beyond the limits of our own survival. We can indeed overcome conventional desires and concepts to act selflessly for the benefit of others.” – Douglas Penick^{xiv}

ⁱ <https://www.whitehallmeditation.org/buddharx/>

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Matt Flickstein

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- iii S.N. Goenka [Finding Sense in Sensation](#)
- iv Gunaratana, Henepola. Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha's Path (p. 58). Wisdom Publications.
- v Claire Greenwood [Renavigating Renunciation](#)
- vi Thanissaro Bhikku, [The Integrity of Emptiness](#)
- vii <https://www.dhammatalks.org/books/PurityOfHeart/Section0008.html>
- viii [Train Your Mind: Abandon Any Hope of Fruition](#)
- ix Gunaratana, Henepola. Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha's Path (pp. 63-64). Wisdom Publications.
- x Pilar Jennings [Fear: An introduction to the special section](#)
- xi Goldstein, Joseph. Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening, p 137
- xii [The Terror Within: Fear and anxiety builds up over a lifetime, but we can release our terrors moment by moment](#)
- xiii (Goldstein, Joseph. Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening, p. 137)
- xiv Penick, Douglas [Exploring What Is](#)