

Letting go

Many people think that the Buddhist teaching of “letting go” is difficult to practise, simply because we must give up what we desire most. First, we need to understand what “letting go” really means. Here, “really” does not mean how I define it, but rather how we see it. (Here “we” actually means “you,” meaning that I try to imagine myself in your position, so that I can write a helpful reflection.)

So, what is it that we find hard to let go of? Let’s begin with something mundane: unrequited love. Say, there’s someone we are in love with, but that person rejects us despite all our more-than-usual overtures and sacrifices. Or, perhaps, we have been loving someone, but then we broke up.

When our love for someone is unrequited, it is painful for various reasons. The most common feeling is that we have failed to win over someone, or that the other person is being unfair to us. Breaking up is also painful because we have to move out of a comfort zone, and now we have to re-chart our life.

One effective way of dealing with such a loss or sense of failure is to simply deal with it. But to do this, we must define and accept what is troubling us: anger, fear, loneliness? Perhaps, we can define that pain as “I feel that I’m a failure.”

We can go one of two ways from here. The first is a method called “labelling.” We resolve our frustration by labelling it, thus: “Feeling, feeling, feeling.” We say this in a calm manner, or whenever we feel like doing it. That’s all it really is, a feeling, “No big deal” Make up a few sentences or phrases that we can work with.

Then, a voice in our head retorts, “Oh, it is more than that, I really wish that” or whatever. Then, we label this as “Thinking ... thinking ... thinking.” All this is most effectively done by labelling two or three times, and then be silent (no thoughts at all, for a moment), let the labelling or input sink into our mind. If we do this regularly enough, we will be able to cope with that painful thought.

The second method of letting go of the suffering is called thought reduction, a kind of self-counselling. This self-talk is perfectly all right – in fact, it is healing – for us to talk with ourselves here. We are the best expert in our own affairs! This way of self-counselling goes like this:

(1) “What really is troubling me now?” (Honestly define the pain, but make it short and clear.)

(2) “Why do I really feel this way?” (We are questioning the first answer. When an answer comes to us, again ask, “Why is this so?” and so on, until finally, we realize that it’s no big deal, after all. However, we cannot rush this process, which is best done in a quiet time and place.

Of course, it is even more effective to use both methods: labelling and thought-reduction, as necessary.

Another difficult thing to let go of is our belief. This can be simply an opinion of someone or something, or even a religious view. For example, we feel that we need to believe something because it makes us *feel* safe, like some idea of a heaven, or a

God-figure. Again here, we need to keep telling ourselves – with the “inner expert” self-talk – that this is only an “idea,” merely a “belief.”

Next, we ask ourselves, “What is it I really want?” Perhaps, “Security ... Money ... Love ...”? Then, we input to our mind, thus: “I am secure! I am secure,” or simply “Secure. Secure.” After saying these words two or three times, just be silent to let the mind take it all in. Or, we can say this as part of our regular prayer: “I completely accept myself just as I am.” Slowly and clearly say this two to three times, and then, be silent – an inner smile here really helps – and then say it again.

We can also say: “I completely forgive myself all those things I have done (or not done, which I should have done). I completely forgive myself.” Do not think about this – say it with feeling. After saying two or three times, again a silent smile, and let it sink in. Repeat this as often as we like.

All this is best done just as we are falling asleep, the very last thoughts – or better, feelings – of the day.

A third kind of letting go is to free ourselves from guru-devotion or hero-worship. This is very tricky because we may not even realize it is a transference or fixation. Maybe we notice this in someone close to us whom we can help. The letting-go therapy works this way. Ask yourself:

“Why do I love this guru (or *name* the person)?” (“He is wise ... handsome ...sexy” Or, “He looks like my father/mother ... Someone I used to love ... Someone I see as ideal ...”) and so on. Be really honest with yourself.

Then, try the “inner expert” self-talk described earlier, as we see suitable and effective.

In religious circles, it is vitally important that we keep a social distance from priests, pastors, monks, nuns, lamas, senseis and sifus. We should never be with any of them in either a secluded spot out of ear-shot of others, or out of sight from others. This is how religious scandals often start, ending with disasters and tragedies.

The most difficult thing to let go of is, clearly, our **self** itself. We are often caught up with a certain self-image, bad or good. We tend to think that we ARE our eye, ear, nose, tongue, or body, that is, how we look, how we sound or talk, how we smell, how we taste (the food we eat, and so on), and the touches and feelings we like.

Or, we may see these very same sense-objects in others – their looks, sounds, smell, taste, or feel – and we (often consciously or unconsciously) compare our body parts with those of others. As a result of such measuring, we see ourselves as being better than others, or inferior to others, or as good as they are.

The reality is that we are only comparing a part of ourselves with others. We are *not* merely our eye, ear, nose, tongue or body: we are all these and also the mind and heart. We should be a whole being, not a collection of independent lifeless parts.

In other words, we are not merely our body; we are also our **mind** or **heart**. If we do not cultivate our mind-heart, then no matter how admirable our body or body-parts may be, we are just admirable meat. This is especially when we love someone because of only the body or a body-part. In time, we will realize that we do not like the rest of that person! We need to know the whole person, both self and others.

The most difficult idea to let go of is perhaps the notion: “This is the way I am.” This is a self-notion. The point is that we have been changing our self-notion over the years. Just recall how we imagine ourself to be when we were 5 or 10 years old; then, when we were teenagers; and, finally, as adults.

We will definitely change our self-image when we are older! The point is that we are changing over time – and if we know this, we can cultivate positive change. The best changes start with understanding the mind and practising mindfulness or meditation. This is where we know our mind, tame our mind, and free our mind.

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