



Letting Go

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The Buddha said in the [Alagaddupama Sutta](#): “*What I teach now as before, O monks, is suffering and the cessation of suffering.*” His approach was similar that of a medical physician dealing with physical illnesses. Suffering is a disease (dis ease) which has symptoms, a cause, a cure and a prescription for its cessation. The Buddha outlined these principles as the Four Noble Truths which might be called the Four Principles of Suffering. When we view suffering as a disease, it is easier to address because we can more easily abandon our judgments about our suffering and realize that suffering affects everyone. Just like flu or cancer, we are all at risk.

In the Fourth Noble Truth, the Buddha outlined the 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.¹ We will explore the first intention: Letting Go.

What is letting go?

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 is a strong desire for something. This could be a desire to possess something or to resist something. Craving 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). While craving may be a pleasant feeling, clinging first manifests as a bodily feeling that is usually unpleasant. Recognizing this feeling is critical to knowing that clinging is present.

Why do we cling and what do we cling to?

We cling because it is our deluded way of seeking happiness. The delusion is that we believe that all of the things that we cling to are permanent, able to give us lasting satisfaction and are a part of our self. For example:

People – we cling to relationships in the anticipation of permanent happiness so that we focus on keeping possession rather than enjoying the relationship from moment to moment.

Things – we derive short term happiness from possessions and suffer from the effort to keep possession. The possessions end up owning us.

Ideas, beliefs and opinions – we cling to these because we think that ideas, beliefs and opinions define who we are and will keep us secure and happy. Yet, ideas, beliefs and opinions are not permanent; they are subject to change. Our clinging prevents this from happening.

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.”ⁱⁱ

In summary, we let of the possession of:

1. People
2. Material things
3. Ideas., beliefs, and opinions.

How do we let go?

We need to know that **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. Letting go is to realize **Non-attachment**, 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.ⁱⁱⁱ

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.”^{iv}

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

The Letting Go Contemplation

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.

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.

1. On the index card that you are holding, write the one of the most important things to you in your life. 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.
2. 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.
3. After your dying process becomes clear in your mind, 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?
4. You may come to a point where you are unable to say good-bye, or to feel whole and complete without the person or experience that is on the card. 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.
5. 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. 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.

Adapted from Matt Flickstein

Letting Go as intention is an ongoing practice. When we sense that clinging is present, usually by the unpleasant bodily feeling, we can take action to overcome it. Here is a process based on the Buddha's teaching of the Seven Factors of Awakening^v:

Another process is as follows:

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 (without judgement and with persistence)
 - a. What is your perception (mental impression)?
 - b. What is your fear?
 - c. What are you clinging to?
5. Realize that the attachment is not real -it is impermanent, unable to give lasting satisfaction and is of self-less nature.
6. Keep investigating each time this attachment arises.
7. Rest in the joy, tranquility and equanimity that follows.

For example:

I look in the mirror and I see new wrinkles.

An unpleasant restlessness arises in my body.

I am mindful of this feeling and I pause to observe my breathing (I am breathing in, I am breathing out).

I investigate. What is my perception? A wrinkle is the sign of growing older and I don't like that. What is my fear – that I will continue to lose my appearance or that I won't be respected. What am I clinging to: I am attached to my body not changing; I want life to be different than it is.

What do I realize? – my body is impermanent, it is unable to give lasting satisfaction, it is not who I am.

“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^{vi}

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

ⁱⁱ Gunaratana, Henepola. *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha's Path* (p. 58). Wisdom Publications.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from Matt Flickstein

^{iv} Gunaratana, Henepola. *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha's Path* (pp. 63-64). Wisdom Publications.

^v III [Gilāna Sutta](#) (SN 46:14)

^{vi} Penick, Douglas [Exploring What Is](#)