

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Letting Go

From a letter written to the Insight Prison Project:

“Today, I start my twenty-eighth year in here. I laughed very hard when I read that you wrote I might as well be a monk. One of the nicknames they call me is ... ‘the smiling monk.’

“I wasn’t always known this way. The first ten years, I was mean and dangerous. In 1985, I was heavily confined for stabbing a man. My mentor appeared in the form of a hit man for the Irish mob who had become a yogi. He gave me a copy of ... [a] breathing sutra, and convinced me that I could not live my life out of anger and rage. He put me on a ... yoga routine with ... [breathing] and sitting meditation....

“For the next two years, I didn’t come out of my cell except to mop the whole block and all the tiers once a day.... I gave myself up to yoga, [breathing], ... and meditation. I followed the breath for a long time, and practiced mindfulness.

“Nothing seemed to be happening. Then I realized that the objects of my awareness began to have texture. By texture, I mean depth.... Soon the texture [revealed] ... clarity.... My mind settled, and I gave up all struggle.... I became still....

“I live this way now as much as I can.... I learned to listen, to care. It was during this time ... that people started calling me ‘the monk of Trenton.’”¹

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¹ Anonymous prisoner quoted in Jack Kornfield, *The Wise Heart*, pp. 252-253

The Buddha taught that there is an end to suffering; not to pain, but to focusing on and resisting and amplifying that pain. Release and grace are possible.

Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.

The Thai Buddhist monk and teacher, Ajahn Chah, said, “Whatever the mind tells you, don’t fall for it. It’s only a deception. Whatever negative comments and views it offers, just say, ‘That’s not my business,’ ... and let it go.” He describes this as “recognizing bad mangoes” – what we call bad apples! “When we choose a fruit to eat,” he asks, “do we pick up the good mangoes or the rotten ones? It is the same in the mind. Learn to know which are the rotten thoughts, and immediately turn from them to fill your basket with ripe, beautiful mind states instead.”²

This is what Buddhists call nirvana: heaven on earth. “Nirvana,” the Buddha explained, “is immediate, visible here and now, inviting, attractive, comprehensible to the wise heart.” *How do we get there?* “When greed, hatred, and delusion are given up,” [the Buddha continues,] ... “we no longer cause sorrow for ourselves or others. [Nirvana is] ... the joyous, natural peace and happiness.... [we experience] when we are not clinging to anything. Sometimes, the letting go is so deep our whole identity drops away.... [Our hearts rest in luminous emptiness,] in awareness, undisturbed and steadfast...”³

Thanks to Kem for this story told by the mother of a five-year-old girl, and repeated by Buddhist teacher and author, Jack Kornfield. “The child had taken a stethoscope out of her mother’s doctor bag and was playing with it. As she put the stethoscope to her ears, the mother thought, proudly, ‘She seems interested in medicine. Maybe she will grow up and become a doctor.... [T]he little girl put the listening end of the stethoscope up to her mouth and [said,] ... ‘Welcome to McDonald’s! May I take your order, please?’”⁴

Letting go is a spiritual practice.

“Paradoxically, letting go is both the goal and the path.”⁵

² *op cit*, p. 299

³ *op cit*, p. 253

⁴ *op cit*, p. 375

⁵ *op cit*, p. 254

When we open our hands, we release; we are generous.
 When we open our hands, we empty; we can say *yes* to what comes.
 When we open our hands, we can open our minds and our hearts.

To let go of the past is not to let go of the knowledge we gained; it is to declare ourselves free of the past that drives our present.... Consider this advice from the man with responsibility for the entire nation of Tibet in his hands: the Dalai Lama says, “If [a] problem can be remedied, then there is no need to worry about it. And if there is no solution, there is no point in being worried, because nothing can be done about it....” His Holiness simply can’t afford to succumb to despair. Despite the circumstances, he is profoundly optimistic and good-hearted.

“What is thought?” query the Buddhist texts. “Thought is your friend. Thought is your enemy. No one can harm you as much as unwise thought. No one can help you more than wise thought.”⁶ I want to share with you the very specific instructions of the Buddha on letting go. There are four levels of transforming our thoughts and actions – each one more strenuous than the last. They are not for the feint of heart! The first two are very accessible, and should be kept handy:

First, he says, “Like a skilled carpenter who removes a coarse peg by knocking it out with a fine one, so a person removes a pain-producing thought by substituting a beautiful one.” We begin by identifying a healthy substitute to replace the unhealthy thought or behavior, and repeat. Over and over: healthy replaces unhealthy.

Second, says the Buddha, when we encounter unhealthy patterns that are too stubborn to be tamed by substitution, we become more forceful. “And when there still arise patterns of unskillful thought, the danger that thoughts will cause pain and suffering should be clearly visualized....” “Like rotten garbage,” says the Buddha, “we can put them down.”

We know the scourge of anxiety or the danger of being possessed by anger. No good will come from succumbing to or acting on it. We don’t judge; out of compassion for ourselves, we meet fire with fire: a powerful new intention.

⁶ *op cit*, p. 294

The Buddha's third and fourth instructions on letting go are designed for significant challenges that require a more forceful practice.

Third, if we are possessed with unhealthy thoughts, he tells us to “deliberately and directly ignore these thoughts, turn away, [give them] no attention.... [T]he wildly unskillful thought stream should be gradually slowed and stilled by slowing the breath step by step, as if gradually slowing one's pace from a run to a walk to ... standing [still].”

And finally, fourth, we access the full arsenal of the spiritual warrior. Now we're talking about being in the face of some terrible breach of humanity or shattering betrayal, when we've gotten to that terrible place where even the thought of letting go of something or someone is actually what keeps us connected to them, chained to the past. The Buddha says, “Such thoughts should be met with force, teeth clenched, tongue pressed against the roof of the mouth, determined to constrain, crush, and subdue these thoughts as if [restraining] a violent criminal. In this way does one become a master of thought.... In this way, one becomes free.”⁷

Note that these are not pleasant affirmations that we are to repeat while looking in the mirror. These are life and death practices to train the mind and regain our balance after everyday disillusionment and disappointment, to reclaim our lives from the jaws of terror and apathy.

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Dr. Lloyd Burton is a Vietnam veteran and Buddhist teacher. I have told his story many times before; it is among my very favorites about the power of letting go.

He writes, “I had served as a field medical corpsman with the Marine Corps ground forces in the early days of the war, in the mountainous provinces on the border of what was then North and South Vietnam.... [C]asualty rates were high....

“It had been eight years since my return when I attended my first meditation retreat. ... [For] all those years, I had sustained the same recurring nightmares common to many combat veterans: dreaming that I was back there facing the same dangers, witnessing the same incalculable suffering, waking suddenly alert, sweating, scared.

⁷ *op cit*, pp. 301-302

“At the retreat, the nightmares did not occur during sleep. They filled the mind’s eye during the day: ... [during] sitting [meditation], during walking [meditation], at meals. Horrific wartime flashbacks were superimposed over a quiet redwood grove at the retreat center. [The dormitory became the makeshift morgue on the DMZ.]

“.... I began to realize that my mind was gradually yielding up memories so terrifying, so life-denying, and so spiritually eroding that I had ceased to be consciously aware that I was still carrying them around. I was beginning to undergo a profound catharsis by openly facing that which I had most feared, and therefore most strongly suppressed.”

I was afraid “that, having released the inner demons of war, I would be unable to control them, that they would now rule my days as well as my nights. But what I experienced ... was ... the opposite. The visions of [the dead] ... gradually gave way to other, half-remembered scenes from that time and place: the entrancing, intense beauty of a jungle forest, ... [and] beaches so white and dazzling they seemed carpeted by diamonds.

“What also arose at the retreat ... was a deep sense of compassion for my ... self: compassion for the idealistic, young, would-be ... physician, forced to witness the unspeakable obscenities of which humankind is capable, and for the haunted veteran who could not let go of memories he could not acknowledge he carried.

Dr. Lloyd Burton concludes, “... Through [practicing letting go,] ... the compassion ... has grown to ... encompass those around me as well... While the memories have ... stayed with me, the nightmares have not. The last of the sweating screams happened in silence, fully awake, ... many years ago.”⁸

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Beloved spiritual companions,

Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.

Whatever the mind tells you, don’t fall for it.

Choose good mangoes!

Thought is our enemy or thought is our friend:

freedom is up to us.

⁸ Dr. Lloyd Burton, as quoted in Kornfield, *op cit*, pp. 342-343

Letting go is both the goal and the path,
Even when the path leads to McDonald's!

On the other side of letting go
is healing, and compassion, and peace.

May you, may we, may all beings
be filled with compassion.
May we be healthy and happy, peaceful, and free.