

Letting Go

Judy Lief teaches us to walk through life without holding on.

By [*Judy Lief*](#)

In our fast-paced society, letting go is often paired with moving on. People encourage friends who have suffered a loss to learn to let go of the past and get on with living. In New Age terminology, “just let go” has become an all-purpose piece of advice. But we humans are very cunning: While we talk a lot about letting go, we usually find a way to have our cake and eat it, too—to let go and still manage to hang on. In fact, it is easy to use the notion of letting go as yet another ego tool. We can use it to prop ourselves up, to cloud things over, and uphold our illusion of solidity. We are so clever: we can take a concept like letting go, so threatening to our ego-fixation, and turn it completely on its head, so that instead it becomes a credential, an ego adornment. We can take pride in our letting go and revel in how pure we are now that we have pared down and simplified and become so much less materialistic. We can mask our laziness by seeing it instead as a letting go of ambition; we can mask our inability to connect with other people with the more spiritual notion of letting go of frivolous attachments. The possibilities are endless. So if we are to deepen our understanding of letting go, it is important to begin with an insight into how easily it can be distorted. Then we may be able to discriminate between a pretence of letting go and the real thing.

To learn to let go, it is necessary to understand how averse we are to change, and how attached we are to our idea of a solid, separate self. At times, of course, we do want change, for various and sundry reasons. But when we begin to bump up against the fact that no matter what we want or do not want, change just happens, we begin to feel a little uneasy. We feel protective. Of what? We’re not completely sure, but we hang on anyway, struggling to secure our ground. We are reactive and we dig in our heels. The greater the threat, the more tightly we hold on. We try to capture something moving and to make it still, so that an experience that has come and gone seems still to exist. Viewing our life as something we can fix and possess, we become completely attached to our mental snapshot of ourselves and equally threatened by its potential loss. We have taken a tiny

speck of the vastness of the universe and staked it out as our territory, and now are stuck with protecting it from change.

How do we deepen our approach to letting go and undercut some of these distortions? The Buddhist teachings provide a pretty clear answer. The starting point is realising that letting go is not a dramatic moment we build up to some time in the future. It is happening now, in the present moment—it is not singular but ongoing. Letting go is based on our present realisation of the reality of impermanence.

Change is continuous in spite of our efforts to resist it. We begin to realise that we do not have any way to stop it or to slow it down. The more we try, the more we suffer. But there is a way to let go, to break this cycle of suffering. We can slow down and have a closer look at our experience of it. When we have a look, we begin to realise what we have been doing, and the whole enterprise begins to feel more and more dubious. It becomes more difficult to hide from what in our hearts we know to be true—the fact of impermanence. We recognise that we have fabricated a false and fixed identity based on self-deception, delusion, and fear; that we have enslaved ourselves to the never-ending project of shoring it up. And we begin to long for another way of going about things.

The process of letting go begins at the point when we recognise how trapped we are. Being trapped is the bad news, but the fact that something or someone has recognised we're trapped is the good news. It's as if we have spent all our life living in a house with very dirty windows, so dirty we had no idea any windows were there. What at first had seemed quite cozy gradually begins to feel claustrophobic. We begin to question what has been so safe and familiar. That questioning is very powerful. To our surprise, as we gingerly explore our little house, a smidgen of dirt falls off a window and we discover a peephole—we see that there is an entire world outside. That tiny glimpse awakens our desire to be free.

Even the smallest glimpse of freedom heightens our awareness of the pain we have created by our ego fixation. Seeing the contrast is what inspires us to go forward on the path. In particular, each time we sit on the cushion and meditate, we relax and let go a little bit more. The notion we've held onto—that if we don't keep up our ego-momentum something bad is going to happen—dissolves bit by bit. In a traditional analogy of walking the

path, it is said that our ego-attachment is like a pair of shoes. Without such shoes we wouldn't start out on the path, although as we walk along, we find that our shoes begin to break down and wear away. But if someone told you to toss out your shoes right at the start, you would be offended. "How dare you! Do you think there's something wrong with my shoes? I love these shoes!"

It is hard to let go of things, harder to let go of ideas, and even harder to let go of spiritual pretensions.

As you walk the path, the letting go happens naturally, just as your shoes wear away. You do not need to make a dramatic statement by tossing them out; you just need to continue on. The path that initially seemed so inviting and accommodating slowly and surely begins to be more sandpaper and scrapes away tougher and tougher layers of leather.

From beginning to end, the path of dharma is about letting go. As we let go of one thing along the way, we find ourselves attaching to the next. As we let go of gross attachments, we find our more subtle attachments becoming heightened. For instance, we may let go of clinging to material possessions, but then find ourselves totally attached to our philosophy of simplicity. It is hard to let go of things, harder to let go of ideas, and even harder to let go of spiritual pretensions. Over time, as we familiarise ourselves with the many subtle twists and turns of letting go, we begin to be more savvy about how ego steps in to appropriate the entire process. In the millions of mini-decisions we make day by day and moment by moment, we are challenged each time either to let go or to re-solidify. To let go cleanly—without re-solidifying—we can practice what my teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche referred to as "disowning":

Even though the acceptance of what is happening may be confusing, just accept the given situation and do not try to make it something else; do not try to make it into an educational process at all. Just see it, perceive it, and then abandon it. If you experience something and then disown that experience, you provide a space between that knowledge and yourself, which permits it simply to take its course.

The letting go itself is not held, but immediately dropped. Then letting go becomes simple and natural, like a snake shedding its skin.

The process of letting go is a tender one. We should notice the poignancy and humor of this very human struggle. It is less of a battle and more a path of acceptance and accommodation to the natural arising and dissolving of our ordinary experience. The two-step process—first letting go, and then letting go of the letting go—allows us to approach the idea of letting go gently, precisely, step by step. In doing so we see that even though we so often tend to re-solidify our experience, between the letting go and the re-solidifying there are real glimpses of openness.

Although letting go is something that happens all along the Buddhist path, it tends to rise to the surface most vividly in relation to death. When dealing with terminal illness, someone else's or, finally, our own, we are bluntly confronted with the ultimate futility of holding onto anything. Our concept of our own mortality, once safely distant and abstract, suddenly gets close and personal in the face of death, exposing powerful emotional undercurrents and deep attachments. At this point, telling someone to simply "let go" may not be very skilful or effective. The problem with the phrase is that there seems to be something solid to let go of, and someone solid to do the letting go. Furthermore, trying to force an experience tends to be a stumbling block in terms of practice.

Death has a way of bringing us back to what is most essential. In the presence of death, I have found that many extraneous concerns and preoccupations fall away quite simply and naturally. A lot of letting go just happens, simply and effortlessly. So we can approach death by attuning ourselves to its presence and all that it has to teach us. In that heightened atmosphere, our own sticking points become more obvious. In working with a dying individual, we can begin with our own letting go—especially letting go of how we want that person to be. We can relax our opinions and moral judgments as to how that person is going about dying. We can be a more true support, less cluttered by our own fixations. On that basis, we can encourage the dying person to use her remaining time to continue on her journey—to let go of attachments and distractions, and at the same time to hold what is truly meaningful.

In terms of our own practice, when we ourselves come to die, we can remain in the space between holding on and letting go. In that space, you are not trying to get rid of anything or force anything to happen. Instead, you are being present with experience, whatever it is, as it arises and falls.

Things go, accept that, be with what is. Being present is the best way of letting go, and, curiously, as we let go we become more present. It may even be possible, as Trungpa Rinpoche suggested, to die with curiosity, and to breathe our last breath without expectation or regret.

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