

# 2005-11-20 Letting Go

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

clinging, restraining, letting, helpful, people, cultivate, tolerating, unhelpful, buddha, endeavor, skillful, unskillful, buddhism, destroy, suffering, called, avoiding, practice, buddhist, belief

## SPEAKERS

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Good morning. And today's theme is letting go. And some people associate letting go with Buddhism. It's a very central practice for Buddhists to learn to let go. And you can let go wisely, and you can let go unwisely. And so it takes some study of letting go. And the reason for letting go is that the analysis the Buddhist understanding of suffering, is that we suffer because we cling without clinging. The claim is that we would have no suffering. And certainly it's possible to look at most of our suffering and see there's usually an element of clinging or craving or grasping or resistance as part of it. Resistance is also considered a form of clinging or craving. And the week we're anxious about things, we're afraid of things, we want things, we're frustrated because things don't go our way. We don't want certain things to happen. We're trying to hold them at bay. There's things that there's malco, a whole slew of things that happen where somehow the mind or the heart tightens up. And that tightening that happens, is painful. So it isn't simply that stuff that clinging causes suffering underline, the very act of clinging causes suffering. So much so that one of the core teachings of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths can be summarized by saying, if you cling, you will suffer. If you let go that clinging, that suffering will stop. And I like that wording because it's a little bit reversed, how it's usually done, makes it easier to go along with I think, if you cling, you will suffer. If you let go of that clinging, that suffering will end, we'll see. So, as people do, practice, like mindfulness of paying attention being present for what is one of the things you'll be present for sooner or later, is the way in which you cling, or the way in which you suffer. And if you meditate, I think you'll probably be aware of it's quite soon, if you keep yourself distracted, either in fantasy or getting busy or something. It's easy to kind of be distracted from one's own suffering. But if you sit still, sometimes it comes to comes clear. And then the task is what how do we relate to that? What do we do about that? And there's a whole slew of things, the whole toolkit that Buddhism offers of what to do, about our suffering, and a whole toolkit that it takes us Beyond suffering into what's called liberation or being awake, liberation, wakefulness, freedom, are all synonymous with the movement of the release of clinging. So the task of becoming free or becoming free of cleaning, clinging is the endeavor, the primary endeavor of Buddhists. And so the question is, how do we endeavor what kind of effort do we make in this endeavor? And in the

Eightfold Path, the Buddha has once one, one piece of the path is called, right endeavor. Sometimes it's called right effort. It's the sixth step in the path. And last week, I began talking about this right effort or right endeavor. And there's kind of a formulaic depiction of what what makes up right endeavor. It's kind of a bit abstract, and then you have to fill in the obstruction. And to be very simple about it, the right endeavor, it is to let go of whatever's unhelpful. and cultivate whatever is helpful. Seems pretty good. So, whatever is unhelpful for you, or unhealthy for you, let go and whatever is helpful for you, or healthy for you, you try to cultivate that. But, the word here is kusala, which means usually translate is skillful. So, whatever skill whatever is unskillful let go of that, and whatever skillful cultivate that and none of these terms helpful, healthy, skillful, imply a moral judgment. I don't think it does. Some people say, oh, that girl, what's bad He cultivates what's good. But that's kind of a little bit then you know, a little bit more moralistic. And this is very important not to take it to be moralistic, because certainly a lot of things we let go of, is we let go of things which are unhealthy or harmful and sometimes unethical. But the interesting thing is that if you have a purpose in mind for your life, some things are unskillful or unhelpful for that purpose, but it helpful for other purposes. So in letting go of what's unskillful and helpful, sometimes we also learn to let go of things, which in other contexts might be quite good, but wonderful. And so, you know, a lot of us do that all the time. We have to make choices in our life between all the wonderful things we can do, and endeavors and some people that go to school and they choose one class over another class. You can't do more than, you know, four classes. The semester something. And so, you know, it's always great weight classes. They're great. They are great classes, but you have to let go of your desire because I never one semester quarter, I try to take classes by the quarter. But as soon as I took the last exam, it was Easter break. I just plummeted into this awful flu and cold just like I did the last period on the exam. I didn't even see it coming the cold and I was sick, the whole Easter break, just, you know, because I think I just driven myself silly with my hard work. And I still wasn't able to do all the things I could have done. Great classes still out there. So this neurotic pursuit of every possible good activity is I think is a illness of many people in our society. So, the teacher goes to the Buddha, whatever you taught, let go of what's unskillful is not moralistic. It's like that which is unskillful and helpful for the purposes you have. And if the purpose is liberation or freedom from clinging, then you need to use that as the criteria for now analyzing what you let go was very strange for many of us when I was in Burma, studying with the Pandita. And he would tell us, we were doing intensive meditation practice all day mindfulness practice, and he would tell us, don't do any compassion practice. What Buddhism is half of Buddhism is about compassion, having compassion. And here we were practicing meditation every day, week after week, and about compassion. It's like, it felt so strange to us to say that it's a cold, cruel, but, but the reason was that I think he had a lot of compassion and he valued the importance of compassion but We were there to do a very particular meditation practice which was considered the practice for, for him his mind for attaining liberation. And so, you know, refrain from doing things which getting away from that just stay on course with his main practice. So, let go of what's unhelpful and cultivators what is helpful. Now, these again are divided into two. So letting go of what's unhelpful is divided into two. One is, you restrain yourself from doing you restrain yourself or you, you, you prevent the arising of unskillful states of mind or activities, which have not yet arisen so unhelpful, unhelpful things which haven't occurred yet. prevent them from occurring. And that's what we talked about last week. This week we're

talking about the second of these of the, these endeavors, which then is abandoned the unskillful states that have arisen. So you can prevent them from coming that's great. But if you can prevent them if they come, then learn to let go of them to abandon them. So prevent an abandoned are the two aspects of letting go. The two aspects of cultivating are cultivating skillful states. And then the second one is keeping them so prevent, abandon, cultivate and keep, and that becomes the acronym pack. And this is you know what you need in your Buddhist backpack. He does have those For tools and so, today is letting go. And I've had people look at me asked me with complete sincerity completely perplexed and say, how do you let go? How do you let go and that's one thing you know, if you're holding on physically to something, you know, your friends trying to leave and you're just holding on, you know, just don't go Don't go, you know, spend letting go just releasing your hand. And something that sometimes I wish my little children would learn. But and sometimes letting go is something that's is physical, honestly inner way. Because one of the things that I find very helpful to do with When I'm holding a claim is to actually see if I can find some place in my body that that clinging manifests itself. So you know, I could it could be gripped in my stomach, you know, I'm gripped and then the grip of something we say, and the grip of something you're gripping. And sometimes your whole body can be gripped because you're tense, your stomach or your shoulders or your jaws, or your eyes or eyebrows or forehead, temples, neck, all kinds of things can be gripped. And sometimes are very strong emotions connected to clinging and it feels you can feel in the body. Sometimes it's very subtle. And sometimes you can be in the grip of or be gripping onto certain thoughts. And certain thoughts we could have reached into hold on to we're really interested in or preoccupied with, and that preoccupation sometimes I can feel sometimes very subtle, tightening up so the muscles around my eyes, my forehead, sometimes in my neck Sometimes seemingly kind of in my deep in my skull, it seems like somehow there's a kind of a tightening up or pressure or that seems to occur. And so if I can identify the place, the physical place where clinging is, I find it very helpful because it's easier for me to let go of physical clinging sometimes, then it is the psychological aspect of the clinging. So it has psychological basis, but the physical basis is sometimes the door until learning how to let go. And also, there is less reason to argue with the value of letting go if it's physical. If it's like a logical you might argue, you know, From Here to Eternity, but why you can't let go it's so important to hold on. You don't have to hold on to my, my, you know, this and that my, whatever it might be, that you're holding to do so important. But physically, you have to hold on to this physical tightening up that happens. Maybe then you can argue, well, I can still hold on psychologically by just, you know, I'll still hold on psychologically, but just let go the physical tension. But if you let go the physical tension, it changes the game changes the whole ecology of the situation, you get you get, you'll get a different perspective on the psychological holding, and then maybe you'll be more likely to let go or you see what's a wiser way to relate to it. So, it can be quite simplistic to say, you know, just sit down and let go. And, to my embarrassment, sometimes I basically give him that message, you know, so easy Buddhist practice, just like go and sometimes it is very easy to let go. And if it was always easy, we'd all be enlightened. Very quickly. We all sit here and you know, just happen. It's like go nuts it's but it's not so easy. There's certain areas many years in life where it's not easy to let go. And yesterday we had a wonderful day long retreats here for teens. And it took pretty good, most of it and and, and in the afternoon you know it was getting real cut off was long day and afternoon. They were a little bit tired. I think I was gonna

get tired. It was a little had a little bit of did not a big dip. Sometimes for grown ups. It's even worse the afternoon. It was a little, a little bit a little different. But then I asked them I mean, I talked a little bit about attachments. And he said what are some of the things you're attached to things you cling to, and they woke up? And it was great. You know, they went through all this whole list they often not everyone raised their hand but they were really honest, with all these 14 year olds, they're really honest about what they can't do and their attachments. And so, what do you claim to be you can be as honest as a 14 year old? Well, I won't put you on the spot. Sometimes I think you'd be like law school, right? Hey, you call on you. So, to letting go is not so easy, I think sometimes. So it's very, I think, helpful to know that in the teachings of the Buddha, he gave seven different ways of letting go, or seven different approaches to letting go. And depending on the kind of cleaning it requires different kinds of cleaning require different kind of approaches. So it can be let go. So let's goes like the overarching goal. But then it can be accomplished through seven different kind of approaches. I don't take these as being the definitive seven ways. And I'm just going to list them and then I'm going to try to unpack it as I understand it. I'll go through the list them first. And maybe you shouldn't try to memorize them, but maybe it's interesting to hear them the list. The first way of letting go first approach to letting go is by seeing using our powers of observation. The second approach is by restraining oneself. The third approach is by using don't complain what that means later. The fourth approach is by tolerating. The fifth approach is avoiding The sixth approach is destroying. And the seventh approach is developing. So depending on what the issue is, one of these seven things is useful. And when I look at this list, I think it's actually helpful to see that the last six are, can be seen as paired with each other. Seeing or mindfulness doesn't ever need to be paired with anything stands alone. But restrict sometimes restraining and using are two different approaches that are kind of connected to each others. And I think it's helpful to see that tolerating and avoiding kind of work together. And I think it's helpful to see it destroying and developing, kind of or appear. Sometimes it's appropriate to destroy and sometimes boys propria to develop. And by understanding them as being paired somehow, then when you get to the destroying Peace. You won't think that all these Buddhists are such, you know, negative, destroying, you know, that isn't that kind of an aversion itself. Anyway, sometimes we destroy sometimes we develop, sometimes we create and we destroy. So seeing, seeing is, you know, the one of the primary things that we do in mindfulness practice, we learn to be mindful and present for what is the see what's going on. And we try to see as deeply and clearly as we can, and sometimes things will let go of themselves. When we seek deeply enough. We don't deal with letting go. Sometimes, for example, if you're feeling off feeling bad or something, and you really begin exploring what is really going on here, sometimes you see clearly the cost or you see clearly where the clinging is, and just seeing it, it lets go of itself or almost like that. One, one. place where people have this experience sometimes is around anger. As long as you're focusing on who's to blame and your anger and you kind of fueling it all. That's one thing. But if you turn our attention around and feel what the cost of your anger is on yourself, really see it. Somebody something I know some people say, gee, no, it's not worth the cost. The cost benefit analysis does not work out in my favor. And, and I think, you know, just just seeing that, I just let go. or seeing that, or the Buddha's teaching is, when you're angry, you're doing your enemy a favor. You're doing you're harming yourself in a way your enemy could never harm you. And when you realize you're doing me a favor, enough, okay, let go of

that. So that's it involves seeing, seeing more deeply what's going on. Sometimes we see our beliefs. What are what do we believe what's behind it? And just seeing the belief poof, sometimes it disappears. So we see for example, maybe that we have this belief that we need to be with a Buddhist center, and Buddhist center, it's really important to be kind. That's the belief. And you realize every time you come in here, you feel you've walked through the door, you feel a little bit of pressed and you don't know why you feel oppressed. You know, something's off you feel here. Oh, no. And then you come in one day, and you're the first one No one's here yet. And you say, well, that's great. I feel so relaxed and someone comes in you feel a bit depressed. And what's going on here, supposed to be Buddhist place but a center supposed to be a place to feel freer and nicer and everything. I feel kind of heavy. And then you finally you pay attention to when you see that you have this belief that you're supposed to be you know, To the epitome of kindness when you're here. And you see that belief. And since you're pretty wise, as soon as you see that belief because of proof, just a belief, there's no authority behind it. No one's told me that. Wouldn't it be great? When you come home, you're kind of grouchy. At least you're happy, being grouchy. And you realize that no one's requiring you to be kind. So, you know, so there's some kind of belief to see the belief and you see the question the authority behind the belief. The Buddha said that in this aspect of seeing, it's also helpful to know that seeing involves in orientation of framer, Kyle, we choose what we choose to look for, in our experience. And there's some things that we look for, that we seek are not useful things to seek for. And so part of using seeing for that go, it's learned how to seek or look wisely. Now I forgot to bring it but there's a great list where the Buddha says is not helpful, skillful, to, to try to find your true self, it's not helpful to find, try to find there is no self. It's not helpful to try to find who you were in the past. It's not helpful to realize who you are in the present. And it's not helpful to seek who you are going to be in the future. So what's left? So what did they at least what the Buddha's trying to do here is all the different ways and we try to we try to relate to ourselves through the concept of self and identity, self identity is spiritually a dead end. Spiritually just doesn't doesn't just lead you into what he called Quick send morass, a maze that you'll never get out of, as soon as you say, Oh, this is who my true self is, you're in trouble. And some people spend a lot of time trying to answer this question, Who am I? And it's very fascinating. The Buddha said, That's not a useful thing to look for. If you want to see, look for something different, you want to see why they find it is something is really skillful for the purpose of liberation. And what the Buddha said, is you look for your suffering, and how there's clinging that causes that suffering. That's what you can look for. Because if you look for the true self, it might might cover over or fringy from simply seeing what's much more immediate. And what's immediate in your felt sense experience is the fact that they're suffering and clinging. They're one once you let go while you're clinging and you have this great freedom and peace and happiness, we're not clinging, then if you're still interested in knowing who your true self is, that's fine. No one's gonna stop you. But, but Buddhists, at least, you know, do the, you know, first things first. So anyway, that's a big deal what I said and some of you who have reservations have like to argue with me and that's for another time. I have to get to the list. So please, please let go because I'm not gonna let go until I finish the list. So the first one is seeing and again, in our mind frustration, we put a lot of emphasis on this so much so that sometimes it seems like the only thing we teach, just look and look and look and look and everything else will follow. The second one is restraining which is similar to We talked about last week.



And that is, I like, here rather than letting go letting go takes the form of letting be letting something be. So you restrain yourself from picking something up. So you see some something very tempting. The world has a lot of temptations. The world hasn't had any temptations at all, actually. But we see them as being tempting. And so we have to be very careful, you don't blame the world, but the world is what it is, you know. So actually, some people actually try to be tempting, or, you know, advertisement try to be tempting. And anyway, so we see something, and then we just don't pick it up. No, thank you. If I pick that up, that's not helpful for me. It's not skillful for me. And there's all kinds of things we restrained from because we realize it's not skillful. Yesterday, I told this 14 year olds that I really haven't watched I don't have I don't really know what's on television. I haven't known what's on television in 33 years their eyes went kind of wide. I'm not sure if my status went down. So some kind of restraint. I don't think I you know, I don't think I'm worse because of it. Kind of restraint and the so learning learning is wonderful capacity not to pick things up. You don't have aversion to anything, but oh, no, thank you. Not gonna pick that up and involves certain kind of strength, that capacity not to get into that reaching forward and grabbing you by the refrigerator. No thanks, I'm content. Or how about if you're full, you've eaten a nice meal, you're actually pretty content, but there's actually more food. So, it's not helpful for meditation to overeat. So we restrained on retreats, we restrained from conversations, very strange thing to do in our society. But on retreats we find very helpful not to engage in socially conversation, because it tends to steer a lot of things up. So I think a wise Buddhist life Buddhist practice involves reflecting them a bit what is useful to restrain from or hold back from enough pick up or not engage in? It doesn't mean that the thing we're restraining from is bad or wrong. It just means that not now. Isn't that helpful for the purposes I have in mind? Or it might be harmful for you. So you learn how to restrain No thanks. Not that Not now. So seeing, and then restraining the next one is using. And this doesn't mean you you refrain anymore means you engage in you pick it up. Sometimes you learn to let go by picking up. When the Buddha talks about this, he said, certain things you need to use, basically. So this way you need to use it you need to eat, you need to close it of housing. So, you pick it up, you use it, but you use it appropriately. You don't overdo it. So with food, you use it appropriately. And you learn to let go but not by letting go restraining from it by just using just the right amount. So you track yourself and watch what's going on. I think this idea of using is very interesting. Because sometimes we're better off. We better we need to understand something really well. And we only only understand by using it By doing it by engaging in it. And so for example, some people are can be quite repressed or out of touch with certain emotions, like anger. And sometimes it's actually helpful, to be angry, to stay angry, so that you can study it. It means maybe you go, you know, into the woods, someplace quiet and you roam and, you know, and so you can be angry safely. But you don't try to restrain it or let go of it too quickly. Many years ago, I spent a little bit time in therapy. And one of the most useful things that therapist helped me to do was after I'd been monk for many years, I practice a long time. And I had I was really good at letting go. And the therapist told me, Gil, don't let go so quickly. You know, first chance you get them like go, and she had this term called hovering. And so just hover with it. Like, go hover with your anchors, let it be there and study it, and have it not really useful. So it's kinda like using letting it be so you can study it, or sometimes you pick it up, so you can study it. When I was in, and there's a lot of things in life, you could do that if you have some problem with something you might choose to do, pick it up, engage in it in a context or situation

where you feel like you really study and be present for it. Maybe you spend an hour meditation first, and your hour afterwards, and then you're gonna do this unskillful unhelpful thing that you do. And you can do it framed by your meditation time, and you have a whole different way of understanding it. You're going to go deeper into it and see what needs to be liberated in that journey. Whenever I was in the monastery in Japan, one monastery in Japan at the end of the seven day retreat. I'll tell us the story a little bit differently. I was told by those monks there that sometimes during the course of the year, they have a ritual or practice. Supposedly secretly jumping over the wall of the monastery and going to town that was kind of like built into the schedule but it was supposed to be secret you know and everybody you know, everybody did it kind of you know, once the lights went out, you know, they did follow the ritual, you know, just right lights went out that counts as a devil monster in bed. Thank you. Let's go out to close the door, the most important window and, and what I was told was that they would go to town there's some bar and they would drink themselves silly. You know, just drink and drink and drink and drink. And, and the theory behind this was they drink themselves so sick, that they never want to drink again. I don't recommend this at all but Some people do this practice not with alcohol, please that's not what I mean. But some people do it with food. You know, you just you're really addicted to chocolate or some cookies. I just can't get free of this addiction. Well go to store buy just a bunch and sit down and you have a whole afternoon you're free and stuff yourself stuff yourself and then you'll you know, you'll never want that again. I don't know if this is wise but but this is I know that there's there's some people who use this as a practice. So you use by using you learn to let go. And so maybe something made you decide to do on your own but maybe if you have some really big problem maybe your teacher will tell you sometimes you know I think this I know this is a technique that works for some people. You learn to let go by using Okay, so seeing we straining and using The next one is tolerating. And some things you'll learn to let go of, by tolerating the difficulty, things are difficult, whether it's cold, it's noisy, it's, you're uncomfortable or something, something's not going quite well. And rather than kind of running away or preventing it, you know, not meditating or practicing or not living with what's going on, you're the letting go happens, you let go into it, you let go into allowing it to be there. So you tolerate. And toleration is the usual way to translate into English. But many of us in English like the word acceptance, or allow, so letting go here means allowing something to be or accepting its presence. And so letting go the ways we're not accepting of it. So sometimes it has to do with our own inner life. So for example, maybe you're grumpy and maybe you come to Buddhist center no Notice you don't have to be grumpy and, and maybe in order to be a peace, miracle that you know, find your peace, you know you're not let go of your grumpiness because you don't know how. But you have to let go of your judgment about being grumpy and just be accepting of this grumpiness. And you have a certain kind of peace because now you're in conflict with your companies. So tolerating allowing, accepting is sometimes What? What's involved in letting go? Seeing restraining using tolerating. The next one is avoiding. And what do you give is a little different than restraining. restraining is when you have somehow tempted is temptation is there avoiding is that you just don't go there. Where your temper where the temptation might be with tendency might be. And sometimes that's a wise approach with certain kinds of clinging. And so for example, I know that some people have addictions issues, alcohol free They've learned that they don't go to bars, because it's just too tempting. Once they're in the bar, they don't go to places where I'll call the serve, because

you know, it's too tempting. So there's a kind of letting go, that we maintain, or do by not simply avoiding situations. So avoiding maybe some people hang out with certain people, we see certain tendencies arise, which are not helpful we were trying to avoid. And so we avoid being around those people. So there's a wise use of avoiding knowing what what's going on in your life, knowing what your tendencies are simply not going to go there. So, seeing, restraining, using, tolerating, and then it was just when I just said, avoiding and then destroying and developing and destroying. You find in the teachings of the Buddha, a lot of Very powerful words like destroy, eradicate, cut off, crush, and having to do with in relationship to our clinging. And there's a lot of words for clinging in the Buddhist tradition. And some of them are things like defilements or toxins, or very powerful words. And, and, you know, none of you I'm sure is you're clinging that, you know, warrants those kind of language. But, but there are people who use have to read the newspaper, you know, who for whom they're clinging is really toxic to themselves and to other people. And so, the aim of letting go and becoming free of these toxins are these defilements of these different forces of clinging is we don't we just want to learn how echoes and you know, every time they appear, the goal of Buddhism is to let go of them once and for all. And some people can be quite good at letting go when they arise. But in, in real deep, genuine Buddhist practice, you want to do more than just let go and the moment, you want to be able to look deeply enough, it's still enough concentrated enough, do the kind of inner work that allows you to get to what's called the roots, the roots of your tendencies, the roots of your clinging. So if you're so if you're clinging to not being a grumpy person, and you it might be at the root of that is that you actually have a clinging to being being a self. The idea of having an identity is at the root of the kind of identity you close your identity with what you close it with. So it's not just simply letting go of being a kind person, if letting go having to be any kind of person. That's More at the root. So to destroy is to another expression is to uproot looking for the roots and trying to uproot them once and for all. And one of the classic examples is to analogies as you apparently could cut a banana stump, the entry at the stump, it can't grow anymore. That's it's you know, some some trees, you know, redwood trees, they sprout again, or banana trees, they cut them off. That's it. So the Buddha said you'd be like you're cutting off the banana tree and can't can't grow again. So to destroy some of these tendencies to claim and then the final one is to develop and some things are let it go by not necessarily developing them, but by cultivating and developing other things. So for example, if you have trouble letting go of been anxious, perhaps what you need to do is you can't let go get your anxiety, what you need to do is develop your confidence. And when the confidence is really strong, the anxiety just sloughs off just kind of doesn't become an issue anymore. Sometimes if anger is a real issue, you can cultivate loving kindness. And when their loving kindness is really strong, the anger just simply doesn't arise. And so there's cultivates certain kind of strengths. And this is a lot of emphasis given in this in Buddhism, because Buddhism has a lot of respect for how difficult it is to really let go. If you really want to do the work of letting go well enough to go all the way to liberation, then it's helpful to develop some kind of strengths also. For one thing, to let go of your self concept, let go of self identity without having some core sense strength. It's very hard to let go sell And then it's very frightening. To let go of some of the deepest clings we have it helps to actually have a lot of strong inner joy, some sense of inner well being. So we cultivate a strong sense of joy well being that allows us then be willing to let go. So that's the topic for next week is cultivation cultivate cultivating skillful states, helpful states. So you let go a



little you'll have a little peace. If you let go a medium amount, you have a medium peace. If you let go completely. You will have complete peace Navy Thank you.