

2006-07-16 Letting Go

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SPEAKERS

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In the last few weeks, I received two requests for topics for talks. And one of the requests was a talk on aging, which I've noticed that everyone does. And the other topic is request was on die. Which I've noticed that everyone does, sooner or later. And, and I'm not going to address these directly. But the topic of the day is very central to both of these aging and death. And it's also central to much of Buddhist practice much of the wise life and that's the topic of Letting Go. So, letting go. And there is a little saying that goes in the pursuit of knowledge. Every day, something is gained in the pursuit of freedom. Every, every day, something is let go of. So freedom and letting go are closely connected in factor. So, you might consider a little bit of some of the synonyms for letting go that close synonyms. There's things like release, letting up, relaxing, lightening up, come to mind. The Buddhism is often associated with letting go and often the extreme form of letting go or one very, very variation of letting go is renunciation a very frightening word. And, in fact, for some people, even the word letting go is problematic. It brings up images of deprivation of doing without of being an ascetic or something. Some Some people even has connotations of something's wrong with me, because I can't let go or it's up to me to do something you like, just let go. Like I say that there's certainly there are reasons to be suspicious of the teachings and letting go. It can be done simplistically, it can be kind of a blanket kind of policy, just let go of everything and you'll be okay. And involves in that kind of blanket kind of approach to kind of denial of life denial and many things. It's possible to let go of the wrong things and diminish yourself as a process in the process of that. But even though letting go can be done wrong, it later Go is still a very, very central aspect of Buddhist practice. So learning how to let go learning how to let go wisely is important aspect of the practice. And so I offer the topic today in this talk today of letting go for your, for fodder for your reflection, so that maybe over the next week, you can reflect and think about letting go and make it a kind of theme of exploration in your life. Because the only Dharma book that's really going to make any difference in your life is a Dharma book that's inside your heart to tell yourself as you do this practice. So letting go. The guy who's kind of like the founder of American psychology, William James, he would a famous book on this kind of psychology of religious experience. He made a point that new religions or spiritual traditions he was familiar with, with which

for the most part, so far I know we're a Christianity among those forms of Christianity that believed in the innate goodness of people or they need goodness of nature. And in the end of 1800s, when he was studying, there was a whole movement, Christianity, natural reaction reaction to the, to the fire, fire and brimstone kind of teachings, they were all sinful and we had to be vigilant. And that existed earlier. We're all bad, because there's Christianity, circles of Christianity that America has swung. And there was deep teachings of a goodness of nature and goodness of life for people. And he's ended, William James said, among those schools, that one of the really important teachings is letting go, letting go and relaxing and letting go can fade into a natural state. And then he said that revivalist preachers back then. And we use this story commonly for letting go. I'll tell you, a Christian revivalist preacher story. A person goes out the walking at night in the countryside and didn't see the cliff and slipped off the edge of the cliff and was sliding down the pappases precipice and then trying wildly to grab onto something with the rocks or come loose, whatever. And when finally was able to grab on to a branch and was holding the dark there was holding on to that branch realizing, you know, feeling or thinking of this is it you know, holding on for life. On the edge of the cliff holding onto the side of a cliff, and it's night, no one's out, no one can hear the cries for help. And the person is holding on really tight. And finally, you know, the muscles just cramping up, it just hurts too much, it's impossible to keep on anymore. And finally, the person just asked to let go and the person falls six inches to the ground. The ground is only six inches away, and the dark they couldn't see it. So now when you do fall off cliffs, don't trust the fact that the ground is only 66 inches below you. You might be a little bit wiser in that real life but you know, this is a spiritual story. So, letting go is it is the ground support only six inches away the Buddhist version of the story is something like this maybe more improbable. Now the person is walking down in the countryside at night and trips and falls over the cliff and tries to grab something, nothing there to grab on to. keeps falling tries to grab something keeps falling in this really afraid, afraid kind of imagining what's going to happen when the person hits the ground, just afraid and keeps falling, falling. After a long while, maybe the sun rises and the person realizes there is no ground. So let's choose your story. means letting go. The need for letting go is so clear. When we grasp and the grasping hurts, we clutching to something holding tight, and we can hold tight to many, many things we can hold tight opinions. And opinions can be relatively easy sometimes to let go of or can be the most difficult to let go of pride and various things come into place. We can cling to comfort, when be comfortable, and it's an epidemic contagious kind of form of clinging that many people in our culture have. The Buddha said that they cling to comfort indirectly said they're clinging to comfort is one of the most foundational and pervasive forms of clinging to human beings. And hearing that from the Buddha, I think it is a challenge and that maybe many times what we cling to is not to opinions, not too many things. You know, more grand things, it's often our cleaning is very simple. Just to be being thin, comfortable or avoiding discomfort, does interesting look at that the degree to which that operates in our life. And we can cling to status, we can cling to safety, we can drink security, we can cling to relationships, partly because of what the relationships are going to do and provide security or safety or, or acknowledgement or love or some kinds of things, we can cling to many, many different things. And if those things that come relatively easy, then maybe we don't notice the pain of clinging, if they don't come our way, or if they feel like we're going to lose them, then the clinging can be quite painful. And one of the ways to study clinging is a study of the inner body. The physical physicality of clinging,

chances are the more you cling, the more you're going to feel that this tightening up someplace in your body. You know, fears that kind of clinging. Feel your stomach maybe tightening, or maybe kind of excessive ambition wanting to get something and you crouch up and tighten your shoulders. It can be in the jaw can be in the hand, some people's hands are chronically a little bit tense, you know, because they're kind of, and some people it's their, their arms or the shoulders or their, their, their spine or the back rib cage or the front grip, or the diaphragm or the stomach muscles or the fives for some people, it'll die some places some people tighten up. So one of the places to study clinging and realizes impact on us physically, to look into our body. And it's really remarkable. The more sensitive you are to your body, the more the body will reveal to you the cost of clinging and the more thickness and the tangible and it looks when it's not tangible. It's sometimes it's difficult to see that we're clinging or even more it can be difficult to know how to let go. It's not uncommon for people to come to me and say this letting go stuff. I don't understand how you do it. How do you do this letting go? And I'm usually a little bit perplexed, didn't know how to tell them because to me it seems kind of obvious. Usually. And usually it's very important to because there are times when letting go is not easy. And this idea of teaching I'll just let go and you'll be fine. It's kind of an insult at times because sometimes the clinging to holding on is you know, you don't even you know that you don't see any any entryway into how to let go. Because it's so locked in so solid. Sometimes it takes a fair amount of relaxing it takes a fair amount of practice in order to let go loose enough in order to let go to practice letting go. It helps if a person understands that it's wise to let go. That letting go is better than the alternative. And unless you convinced him that, why not go? Do you think of letting go is where the answer is holding on is where the answer is, you're not gonna want to let go. So to be able to reflect and understand, maybe talk to your friends and explore and think about letting go and the value of it, maybe having conversations with friends this week, what are the what's the opportunities that are inherent in letting go? Isn't that interesting way of saying it? What are the opportunities in letting go? And saying that doesn't mean that there isn't maybe disadvantages in letting go? Maybe there are opportunities in holding on, you really aren't a cliff. But what are the opportunities found in letting go and some of those we'll talk about in a while. Many years ago, I was I went to To visit visit Arjuna Morel a Buddhist monk up in Ukiah. And I work with a group of people and it's often accustomed when you go to a monastery like that, especially to go in the morning to bring food for their, their meal one meal of the day. And in fact, many people I went with brought lots of food for the meal. And in going up there, I was really inspired to support these monks practitioners out there and to bring some kind of food and I knew that they had back then they had very few visitors. And so they would have you know, the weekends had a lot of visitors they get a lot of food, but then the weekdays they wouldn't have a lot of visitors and they would be given a lot of food. But I knew that that they had to lay people living there who could keep dry goods in the cupboard. And then you know, cook it during the week when food wasn't brought to the monastery. So I thought ahead and so I brought all this rice and beans and dry goods Brought it. So I was happy to do that until that we were there for lunch that day. And I had no idea this was their custom there. But we were all sitting in this room around the big circle, the monks in one side, sitting on the side, and we're going to have the noon day meal. And the way the food is brought in, it's brought into the room, and then it's passed around from those senior monk to the junior Junior monk and amount to everyone else, and we serve ourselves from the bowls of food. But as each dish is

brought into the room, it's announced who donated the meal that that dish that day. Well, it didn't take me long to realize that everyone's name is going to be announced except mine. Because I didn't bring anything for that meal. I bought things for future meals. And I could feel this impulse inside of me Stand up for yellow. Yeah, but I didn't bring anything to this meal, but I brought lots of food. I, you know, I need, you know, you know, this impulse to kind of, you know, correct any mistaken notions people had about me or, or to prove that in fact I was generous and you know Katie thoughtfully or whatever, and it was perfectly appropriate to stand up and say that you know, just having this nice meal we're sitting in a nice circle and I could feel this cleaning and myself and Tosca seen happening. And so, so, I had two options. One right then and one later, one option was to let go. Like go that impulse in the go meetings be seen a certain way. Okay, I mean, I could suffer I could speak up and it just seemed super, that would help. So it's like go, relax, relax, lighten up, around this and the other option was many years later to tell a big audience like this. So you would know the true story. Wait for your time, right? So this idea of letting go is very important. And it was one of the important things to look at is the opportunities that come from letting go. Letting Go is not only to do without, it's like two sides of a coin. There's you let go of something and that allow Something else to happen. In order to allow something new to happen, generally has to be some kind of letting go. Even we don't often think that way. Letting Go is always happening. And in fact, it's quite an it's a natural thing to want to let go to some degree, because things are often going to natural for things to go. And the word left and letting go has the Association of allowing, allowing somebody to go. If things are going and allow them to go, they're going to be grace around them. Rather than trying to prevent it from going Hold on tight. Let's not let this go. My youth. Right? Some of us, our youth is disappearing. So letting it go, is partly means to allow it to go to be gracious about it. Let it go. If it's time to die, The hope is that something like Buddhist practice is gonna allow you to die with grace, die with the grace here. What I mean by grace here is maybe a better word is graciousness in the sense of allowing yourself to go when the time comes to go. It's possible to hold on tight to the very last moment. And you know, that's one option. The other option is to allow they're going to be more gracious way more peaceful way. So, to let go to allow to go with some grace, spaciousness. Things that are naturally going is one of the meanings one of the meanings of letting go to two sides, there's letting go is letting go of something. And then there's letting go into something. So there's letting go. And you can like one hand you can let go of something. And in Buddhist spirituality, the most of One thing to let go of, is your clinging. Not necessarily letting go of something. And there's sometimes a confusion that I've let go of my money, I've let go of my house, I've let go of my, you know, all kinds of things. And Buddhism doesn't say to lay people, you have to let go of anything, you know, like an object or person or something, we have to let go or is the clinging and grasping to it. And that's a hugely important thing. He's like, oh, diversity. And maybe I've made this use this example too many times, I apologize. But it's like the example so much. If you hold on to a bell, really tight and grasp it, small bell, you don't get a nice sound. But if you hold it lightly, if you just kind of let it rest in the palm of your hand, you get a nice sound. So letting go doesn't necessarily mean that you're letting Go of anything, you're letting go, the clinging, the grasping to it. And then you can decide whether it's wise to put it down, or whether to handle it very differently. So that's a very important distinction, letting go of something, versus letting go of the clinging to something. And the hardest to spiritualize, letting go, letting go, the clinging. She was letting go of

something, sometimes we let go of things, you know, it's very, sometimes very wise to let go of certain things. If we people who are overly busy, it's good to let go of some of the list of things we do. Some people have too many possessions, and it's just a burden. And some people find a great delight to let go of some of the possessions because it just lightens up their life. Some people find it's a burden, to try to always want more and more money, and some people. This is a very bad advertisement for Buddhism. And what I'm about to tell you so and that is that some people Engage in Buddhist practice become downwardly mobile, an American dream. And, and because some people find that actually doing, working less, or having a less stressful job, letting go those things actually leads to a wiser life. So there's a time and place for letting go of things. But the heart of Buddhist practice is letting go of clinging. And what you do with things is has to do with your wisdom. But then there's letting go into something. Then you go into something. Remember, William James said, those religions that have believed in the natural goodness of life for people relaxing and letting go, we're letting go into our own natural goodness. And there's many, many Buddhists who have this kind of teaching as well our Buddha nature or something. So what are some of the Things we can let go into. For some people, when there's a lot of stress or attention, a lot of meanness a lot of something letting go might allow us to reveal some kind of inner goodness, sense of generosity or compassion or peace, relaxation, ease. And I still after 30 years plus now Buddhist practice, I still delight in him for almost like in a way like I'm surprised at how little I need to feel happy. I could sit down to meditate and might be kind of grumpy or tense or something initially, but just letting go and sitting here and let the attention relaxing attention strip away. And, and in the end, you know, all the things I think I need to do that day my to do list and things are so important. You know, the kind of all those wanting and wanting has come embedded in my muscles. It's very hard to you know, muscles kind of almost come with lawyers. It has to be this way. But then, you know, as we begin relaxing and relaxing, you feel like I don't have to do all these things. I could just be, just be present just be as deeply satisfying kind of light. So to let go in Legos define the kind of simplicity of being, which is very deeply satisfying. Sometimes it's possible as a culture as well to make people familiar with the value of letting go, we don't use that language. Some people are able to go on vacations. And part of the value of vacations is that we able to let go forget about which maybe we should forget about. We forget about some of the concerns and preoccupations we have with normal life and work and vacations are rejuvenating, because we kind of drop away many of the concerns that are so stressful for us. Letting Go can be rejuvenating Part of its value for the opportunity. So there can be letting go just if you're tense enough, holding on enough, just letting go itself is satisfying. We'd like go into the opposite of clutching, ease peace, relaxation, something. But there's also letting go into something which is more our choice. We can choose to let go into something as part of the effort, not just simply letting go into some natural goodness, but letting go into the goodness which we choose to let go into. So for example, in letting go You can also focus on letting go into a sense of gratitude. Gratitude is really a beautiful thing. And I know in myself that I don't go around, thinking gratefully, automatically. I don't wake up in the morning and thinking what am i grateful for now? But gratitude is a great quality to have and it brings me sensitivity Light and happiness to be grateful. And sometimes I'll choose to kind of think about what are the things that's happening supporting my life things going on right now that I can feel grateful for. And this might seem really trite if I tell you some of the things I feel grateful for, but it's how easy it is. And I'm grateful for

traffic lights. I'm grateful that the streets are asphalt properly. I'm grateful that telephones work. You know, I'm grateful that so much works that I can go to and go to stores and easily buy an A just like we live compared to some places in the world. We live in heaven. The ease and simplicity by which we can just go down, you know, you know, go down the Camino here, and you have to kind of make this really difficult decisions like, Do I go to Whole Foods or a Safeway? And then the choice is just the first choice and you go into the store and it's ridiculous. So at least I can have some immune maybe it's too much but we can have some gratitude. What Help, you know, and I find it actually very nice state to be grateful. So to let go into gratitude, more profound, perhaps maybe not is to let go into appreciation. If I'm caught up in my concerns, maybe I can't appreciate the person I'm with so much appreciate myself or appreciate my circumstances. And so can you let go into appreciation letting go, just to make room space for more appreciation of this moment right now? What's happening here now? What is it that can be appreciated now? Sometimes I know it's really easy for the mind to put together the litany of things that are not to be appreciated right now. All the problems, all the difficulties, and some of them might be, you know, reasonable enough. But the mind can be obsessed on that and lost in that world. Is it possible to lighten up, ease up a little bit from that and open up in that easy up again, kind of looking around, what is it that can be appreciated right now? What needs to be appreciated here now? Letting go into compassion, letting go into sense of love. Letting go into peace, be let go into something. So my suggestion here is that letting go is a really wonderful opportunity that allows something wonderful to happen. Maybe not easily always, but sometimes it can be easily. And if we have a sense of the opportunities there, maybe it's easier to let go. It said that forgiveness is a kind of letting go. The cliché is that forgiveness is giving up. Giving up is another word for letting letting go right giving up giving up hoped for a better past. So, you know, he's a kind of letting go, you know forgiveness. I love the word forgiveness because of the etymology of the word to give giving, giving up. So, letting go, to make space in our life for letting go take the time to let go. If we're always driven and go and go and going, we can't let go. And if we want to be rejuvenated, we have to make space for that. That's what vacations are. meditation practice is a form of vacation. Give yourself 40 minutes vacation every day, sit and meditate and let go and like there are some teachers whose only meditation instruction He is sit down and let go. That's all they teach. Isn't that amazing? I think maybe there should be little bit more than that. But, but, you know, that you get you can go really far. If you sit down Let go, let go. And I gave him an instruction to some people who, when they try to meditate, are always doing and manipulating and judging and criticizing themselves and kind of getting tight and worried and, you know, it just some people the, the meditation is this huge engineering project where they tie themselves in knots. And so then the instructions are just like go just sit down just like go every time you notice you're trying to do anything but let go, let go. And then if you do it long enough, if you can really go to the letting go. The don't only let go every attempt to do something, except letting go. Let go of every attempt to do Something including the attempt to let go. Because there's something wise about that, like of every effort. Because a close relative to letting go, a very profound relative to letting go is letting be letting something be. So just letting something be. So we don't react to them or judge it, we don't push it away, we don't hold on to it. Just let it be. Let it be. Nothing has to be changed. Find our peace, our freedom in letting it be. This is very helpful sometimes with attitudes towards ourselves. Sometimes it's difficult to let go, we feel angry or grumpy or feel filled with desire or

something. Hate. And so sometimes the wisest thing to do is to let it be not let it be in electronics, but sit in meditation and just let it be there so you can see it's really well study it and not be in a reactive mode to it. If you try to let sometimes you can try to let go of something that can be a subtle in the letting go, that can be a subtle aversion and sometimes it's wiser just let it be letting be is a kind of letting go. Just let it be just sit here and let things be. So the last thing, a couple of last things for me. One is that it is hard to let go. And when it's really hard when it's really hard to let go, there's suffering there, it's there's good feel the suffering of not being able to let go. But it's really important to realize that like certain certain issues, you can't just snap your fingers and like go it's not that easy. Sometimes you what's needed is you have to thin get them to thin out the mind or thin out the Crockett patients of the mind and part of the function Have a meditation practice like coming back to the breath. Coming back to the breath is each Sunday come back to the breath, the energy of the mind is not going into the preoccupation and taking the energy of the mind and you're putting it towards the breath, ah the breath. And slowly you begin to slip. Don't underestimate the value of that shift of energy away from preoccupation towards something more neutral, the breath and slowly, slowly, the mind will relax only the body will relax and slowly your baby feel that your power, the strength of your thoughts, your presentations, start getting started getting out getting out. And then at some point, they get thin enough that you can let go. Okay, weaker and weaker, then you can let go. But you have to wait until things get weak enough enough to be able to do that. So the questions from Or each of you this week is, what are the what's the opportunity for you in letting go? And what are the most useful things? areas in your life that you couldn't bring? Letting go to? Where are they useful years of your life would be useful? Where are the opportunities you can take in letting go? Think about this. Think about it this week, talk to friends, they go for a walk with a friend and say I need it. I'm sad. his homework from IMC was to talk to a friend about letting go and I've chosen you in the pursuit of knowledge, or wealth, or status or in the pursuit of knowledge. Every day something is gained in the pursuit of freedom. Every day, something is like may you all be free