

Mindful Letting Go (3 of 5) Letting Go as Generosity

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

surrender, sacrifice, altar, *dāna*, *paṭinissagga*

Gil Fronsdal

We continue with the third talk on wise letting go, mindful letting go. There are wonderful double meanings in the ancient Pali language around the words for letting go. Three prominent words for letting go also have the meaning of generosity. The connection between letting go and giving is that to give something, we have to let it go. We have to hand it over. We have to no longer hold on to it or hold tight.

I believe this idea of connecting letting go with generosity also exists in the modern English language. There's the expression "giving up," which means kind of a surrender, an unwelcome surrender – for example, "Well, I just have to give up hope."

Giving up originally meant offering something up onto the altar. It was kind of a sacred act to give something up, to hand something over. The word "surrender," which comes from French, has the meaning to give from below, or to give up, to hand up, to offer up. There is the fascinating word "sacrifice," which can also feel like we have to give up something wonderful and suffer a little or be deprived or have something in order for some greater good. But in Latin, sacrifice means to make sacred. I think that also meant offering something to the altar or the gods.

One of the primary uses of letting go in Pali is as a synonym for generosity, giving, *dāna*, charity. It's a synonym, so depending on the context, you have to know whether to read it as a kind of letting go or as a kind of generosity. We could get both meanings if we translated it as "giving away" (rather than "letting go"), where the emphasis is on generosity. That word *paṭinissagga* is also associated with delight.

So I think the Pali word for letting go has a lot of positive associations, which might be missing for English speakers. Some people hear the word letting go, and it seems like bad news. But in meditation, we're not really letting go of any things. That is for wisdom to know if things in the world need to be put down, abandoned, or not done anymore.

In meditation, the primary thing we let go of is ideas, thoughts, and stories so that we can offer our attention to the present moment. Is there a way of not being upset, discouraged, or aversive to our distracted mind, but to see the act of letting go of them as something akin to generosity? Or something related to the good feelings that come from generosity when it's done really well or simply? We're allowing them to go; we're generously letting them depart.

After all, do you know where your thoughts go when you let go of them? It's possibly a very generous thing for your mind to grant the possibility of not churning and ruminating. It's healthy for the mind to not have to keep doing that, to not keep bearing the weight and tension of that. So letting go can be an act of care and concern and taking care of the mind: "I'm going to generously offer to let go of this so you don't have to struggle with this anymore."

I don't know if this works for some of you to hear this association. But anytime we do a meditative or Dharmic letting go, one of the really important parts to look for in the wake of that is joy and delight. That might be too strong in certain situations. But look for the ease that comes, look for something that lightens up, or notice that there is a little more space. There's something that feels right or good that comes with healthy, wise letting go.

I learned this many years ago when I thought I was letting go. In Buddhism, there's a lot of letting go so I thought I could do it. I would somehow let go of things, and then they would come back and bite me. I'd get angry or snap at someone.

What I learned was that if I let go and it was a neutral experience, then I hadn't really successfully let go. To really let go there has to be something that has a positive feeling to it. So even in situations where it might not be appropriate to be joyful or wouldn't be joyful, there's still a feeling of rightness or appropriate goodness or some lightening.

So we can either think about letting go as an act of generosity or how we can let go in a way that feels good and right, both in the act itself and in the aftereffect of it. In the act itself, you want to be careful there's no aversion or sense of obligation or feeling "I'm bad and I have to not do this anymore." Or feeling shame about how we are – that we have to get rid of these thoughts or inclinations, hide them, or let go of them quickly so hopefully no one will notice. Those kinds of movements, while it's understandable people would have them, don't tend to bring the sense of uplift that we're looking for in the act of letting go.

So how to let go? We let go without aversion, without insistence, without expectation to be successful even. We do it with an open hand, an open heart, an open mind. We calmly offer it up, not in a hurried way. Then, after we've let go, take a moment to appreciate the goodness, the rightness, or the feelings of uplift that come with letting go. Don't let go and then quickly rush off to the next moment of thinking, feeling, or doing.

Take a little time – maybe a moment, it doesn't have to be long – to feel the relief, the openness, the goodness, the wonderful absence of tension or preoccupation. Registering the feelings of goodness and uplift reinforces the benefits of letting go and supports coming home to a good way of being. So letting go is not just letting go, it's also letting go into or allowing something to grow and develop that is appropriate, helpful, and healthy to do.

The same thing is true for relaxing the body in meditation. Often, at the beginning of meditation, it's good to relax. It doesn't really work to rush the relaxation. It doesn't really work to tensely relax and greedily relax, but to relax in a generous, supportive way. It is a generous act to relax. We're generously taking care of our body, our mind, and our inner life by relaxing the body. We can feel that generosity. What we have here is the idea that it's possible to be generous to oneself just as much as it's possible to be generous to someone else. Letting go, releasing, giving up has a way in which it is a positive thing.

The Buddha said that when there's letting go and it is wholesome, it brings along wholesome states. It benefits the wholesome development of our being, our character. That is the letting go he promotes. If the letting go is unwholesome, if it diminishes us in some way, if unwholesome qualities come up, that is not what he recommends.

So letting go that is wholesome. Perhaps, we can get a sense of that with the experience of generosity. May all of your letting go be a delightful, enjoyable, uplifting experience of generosity for yourself and for others who benefit from your generosity. Thank you.