

Mindful Letting Go (4 of 5) Allowing Release

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Gil Fronsdal

In exploring this topic, we can appreciate there are many different kinds of letting go. I am using letting go as an umbrella term for the many different types. Today, I want to introduce the idea of release. The way I use the word “release,” there is a distinction between the act of letting go that we do versus the release that happens independent of our doing. For example, you might feel tense and tight in the shoulders – your shoulders are up by your ears – and someone says, “You might want to relax your shoulders.” You feel there, “Oh yeah, I can do that.” Then you relax your shoulders. It’s pretty straightforward – you do it.

But sometimes your shoulders are up by your ears, and you know it. As soon as you know it, someone might say, “Look, your shoulders are tense,” and before you even do anything, something releases just in the knowing of it.

Sometimes just the space of leaving things alone allows something to release. Partly that is because when we’re able to leave things alone – let them be – we’re not fueling it. We’re not feeding it. We’re not actively involved in continuing it.

One of the principles of Buddhist practice and psychology, which I think is well supported by modern understanding, is that we are constantly renewing our grip on things, our resistance to things, our compulsivity. It’s not constant like we grab on and then we’re not going to let go. It’s a constant in the mind, kind of having to redo it, redo it, redo it.

Some of you have done this exercise with me where I ask people to make a tight fist with their hand. Those of you who haven’t done this before might try it now. Make your hand into a really, really tight fist so that it almost hurts. Try hard to keep your tight fist while I tell this story. Remember now, keep your fist tight.

In India, maybe in ancient times, there was a way that people caught monkeys. They made a hole in a coconut and would tie a rope to it. In the hole, they’d put a piece of sweet candy. The hole was such that the monkey could only put its hand in flat.

Now, are you still holding your fist tight? Be sure to keep it tight.

The monkey would put its flat hand into the slit in the coconut and grab the candy, but in doing so, the monkey would have to bunch up its hand. When the monkey tried to pull its hand out, it wouldn’t go out of the slit. The monkey is greedy and so it didn’t want to let go of the candy. Then the hunter would come along and grab the monkey. That is the end of the story. You can let go of your fist now.

The lesson in this little exercise is that chances are you had to keep reasserting your grip. Since the story was so gripping in itself, you were probably in a little conflict there – the story versus the gripping. Something would begin releasing and then hopefully, you would remember to tighten up your fist again.

The natural movement of a tight fist is to relax. It’s like the tight fist longs to release sooner or later because there is a lot of work, tension, and effort to keep it tightly closed. It is the same with any clinging within us. It’s work; it’s a lot of effort. The natural calling – the movement, the direction that it wants to flow – is to release, is to let go. So, if that’s the natural tendency, then when we just allow things to be, we’re no longer feeding it, no longer reasserting it, and something has a chance to let go.

The lesson of this kind of release is that we are not the agent doing the letting go. The system releases itself. It turns out that when we are the agent (the doer), that itself represents in some kind of way a very subtle form of clinging, grasping, wanting, and interfering. We still want something.

It's innocent enough to want that. It's actually healthy at times. It's healthy to be the doer of letting go when it's easy to do so. But some people overemphasize their responsibility in letting go: "It's up to me, and I have to do it. Why can't I do it?"

As practice gets stiller and stiller, deeper and deeper, the movement of being the agent of change agitates the mind. In ordinary, everyday life, being the agent of change is far from agitating because we're somewhat agitated already. However, in deep meditation, it is too much to be the doer. So this idea of just holding experience, just being with it permissively and allowingly – that is all we do.

In the example of cupping my hands this way, I love the image of just holding my feelings, my fear, my anger, my pain, whatever it might be – just holding it this way. I'm not doing anything or wanting anything. I'm just allowing it to be, and it begins to rest a little.

It's like having a tight fist, and someone comes along to support the weight of the fist. Then the fist can begin to relax. At some point, even this wonderful way of just holding experience is too much. We're there – holding it, allowing it to be – and then we also let go of that. Or that releases itself. Even the holding of experience gets released.

This idea of release (which we don't do) is that the letting be of mindfulness allows. We don't always know what it is that we need to release or let go of. But this allowing awareness – just there with experience – helps the inner life find its way so it knows what to release.

Maybe we thought that the idea was to relax some deep physical tension. But it turns out that what is really helpful and has long-term implications is releasing our resistance, our judgments, and our negative views of ourselves and the tension in the body. Release all the reactivity and thoughts you have about it. Release that. The tension might remain in the body, but what is released and where you feel free is in the mind. Then you're more okay with the tension in the body.

Ultimately, what gets released in Buddhist practice, as we go deeper and deeper, is greed, hatred, and delusion; clinging and grasping. We're not really letting go in the depths of our hearts and minds of things that are wholesome. We're not letting go of love, compassion, generosity, and wisdom. We're letting go of that which is problematic and a source of suffering. We're not asked to let go of the things and people of the world. You need to have wisdom to know what to do about that.

Deep letting go is like the call of our tight fist to relax. The call of the heart is to release – to be released from greed, hate, and delusion. Released from all the different ways in which the heart, the inner life, is contracted, tight, and clinging. Those are things that are causing suffering, and so that is what gets released.

It's phenomenal how thorough that release can be. It is so thorough that when there is a full release, there is a phenomenal absence of suffering; a phenomenal absence of clinging; an absence of coagulation, bunching up, pressure, and tightness. Just a lot of release. A lot of peace and happiness. And all the wholesome things, the good things, can still be there: our wisdom, love, compassion, generosity, patience, equanimity, and dedication to serving as well.

It's a beautiful, wonderful, and profound thing to serve the world, even the small, significant ways of supporting our family, neighbors, friends, and community. We can do that without any of the coagulation of obligation or the heaviness of responsibility or duty. It's just an expression of release, an expression of freedom. And it's done freely.

Everything we do can be freely offered with a happy, relaxed, and peaceful heart. May it be contagious. May we learn how to live in service of the world freely and happily so that others realize the blessings of doing that. May our release be a blessing for all. Thank you.