

The Art of Letting Go

Yael Schweitzer, LCSW, BC-DMT

May 19, 2010

“Do everything with a mind that lets go. Do not expect any praise or reward. If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will know complete peace and freedom. Your struggles with the world will have come to an end.” - Still Forest Pool - Achaan Cha

When we practice mindfulness, when we learn to notice thoughts without getting carried by their content and when we learn to sit with pain or discomfort, we basically practice letting go. Most clients who come to see me are holding firmly onto something - their story, their fears, losses, expectations, relationships, possessions - even when these things cause them pain and suffering. We all tend to hold those and more, and learning to let go can be an act of release and healing.

The major part of holding takes place in thoughts - obsessive thoughts, worries for the future and regrets of the past, thoughts that form your philosophy of life and the belief about who you are and what is your journey in the world. There are three ways of mindfulness practice that cultivate letting go of the grip of thoughts:

1. Awareness and exploration

a. Bringing awareness to the thoughts, noticing the process of how thoughts emerge, develop, rise and fall, appear and disappear, helps to neutralize the identification with the content of the thought.

b. Bringing awareness to the content of thoughts with inquiry, one can learn to identify themes and topics that rise repeatedly, note them and just observe without getting involved in the content. This “scientific” observation approach serves as a way to let go. When you are curious about the phenomenon of thoughts you naturally are less attached to the message that the thought carries. The observation neutralizes the identification with the content.

2. Focusing on the breath (or the body or an object)

The basic method for practicing mindfulness is to focus on the breath. When thoughts are coming and the meditator notices them, he/she just shifts awareness back to the breath. This gentle inner action of shifting awareness serves as a practice of letting go. When one notices thoughts, the tendency is to follow, to get engaged in the content of the thought - even if this engagement brings pain and suffering. Noticing the inner activity of thinking and choosing not to get involved but rather reconnect with the breath, is an act of letting go. You allow yourself to let go of the thought.

3. Openness

a. Physical openness: Holding means tightness. Holding with your hand means that you tightened and folded your fingers. When we hold sadness, anger, hatred, worries etc, there is a tightness and closing in the chest, belly, and jaws. Adapting a sense of openness, developing a sense of wide chest, open arms, open face, helps to let go of the inner holding and tightness.

b. Mental openness: developing a wider view of a problem and seeing the relative place it takes in the whole tapestry of one's life helps to let go of the sense of emergency and magnitude of whatever one holds. Assuming perspective can apply not just to one's life, but also to the general scheme of things, the place of the individual within the society, nature and the universe. These forms of mental openness release the constant hovering over the issue, and give a sense of release.

We all know of another way to let go, usually for a limited amount of time, the way of distraction. Distractions can be helpful sometimes to ease tension, anxiety and pain, and as long as they are not destructive, they can be used. However, distractions are not part of mindfulness, and their affect is limited with no cumulative effect of growth.

It is important to note that in the mindfulness methods the idea is not to ignore a problem or not address it - it is about a choice between suffering and freedom. One can still choose to deal with issues that need to be addressed, but do it from a place of non- attachment. Letting go releases the energy that was captured by holding to be used for creative and meaningful changes.