

## NEWSLETTER

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### LETTING GO

I have recently been talking to some of the congregation about letting go, and I thought that it might be useful to share our thoughts and experience on this subject. I often talk about this as an important aspect of training, and it may sometimes seem an elusive practice. It is, however, really very simple.

At least when I use the term on its most basic level, I simply mean not allowing myself to be controlled by something arising within me. Letting go is an important aspect of our practice. It is the "not holding onto, nor pushing away" of whatever might arise within us in our meditation. By "whatever might arise" I mean any impulse, feeling, thought, emotion, perception, memory, idea, ideal, etc. For example, perhaps we have decided that a particular habitual activity, e.g. judgmentalism, or anger, or lust is something that we no longer wish to encourage. When we recognize its arising, we have, at that very moment, the choice of whether to go with it, or to essentially ignore it, to let it go. This doesn't necessarily mean that it goes away. It just means that we choose not to allow it to control our behavior of thought, word, or deed. At least this time, by letting go, we choose not to indulge this old habit.

Another example might be a particular craving with which we are struggling, perhaps a specific food, or desire, or activity that we know we love to indulge, and we also know that that indulgence is not good for us. I believe that most of us have successfully avoided such an indulgence. Therefore then, on some level we already understand letting go because we have done it. We probably also understand, through experience, that just doing it once is not enough. The craving will almost certainly continue to repeatedly arise. By being willing to try to repeatedly let it go, we move in the direction of religious training.

There will also repeatedly be times when we see that it is good to let something go, that we should let it go, but we simply don't want to. Our clingings are often deep habit that we have repeatedly reinforced. They may be experienced the way an addiction is experienced. We need to understand this and have sympathy for ourselves in trying to deal with something fully as strong as an addiction. To successfully make this our religious practice, it is not necessary to want to let something go. We simply need to be willing to let it go, to understand that letting it go is good--the right thing to do. We need to accept the fact of our clinging, while working to try to not let it control us. Not indulging these karmic habits is the only way to eventually be free of their control.

One difficulty that may arise when we successfully let go of some clinging is an uncomfortable feeling of emptiness. This is not the positive, pure emptiness described in some scriptures, but a kind of despairing emptiness of loss. We may even experience a kind of disorientation, a confused feeling of "What am I going to do now?"; "What am I going to fill this hole with?" We may identify a particular clinging as an important aspect of ourselves, and letting go of it as too threatening to our understanding of who we are. The thought, "What will become of me?" may even arise. Some trainees have, in fact, actively welcomed back a particular craving because this feeling of loss was so overwhelming.

I am not saying that such feelings will arise, only that they may, and it would be good to be prepared for that. This practice of letting go is essential to our eventually dealing with, converting our suffering. If that eventual result is our wish, then we need to be willing to try to persevere even in the midst of confusion or despair. The selfish-self has many ways of encouraging us to give in to its desires. It takes courage to say "No." Here again, having sympathy and compassion for ourselves, even while recognizing our craving and firmly saying "No," can be helpful. Cultivating sympathy and compassion helps our training become more and more gentle, and helps us to persevere.

Some of us may flip from indulging in something to trying to fling it away. This is being caught in the opposites--and this is OK. It is fine to begin here; that is how we

learn, but we mustn't get stuck here. Eventually, we need to recognize that it is not good to indulge in this clinging, and then just not do it--metaphorically simply opening a clenched (clinging) hand and letting go. There are times, however, when we may react with horror or distrust at that to which we cling. Our inclination at that time may be to try to hurl this habit away from us with all of our might. That reaction is certainly understandable, especially when we initially see some particularly ugly craving, or when we see that we continue to allow ourselves to be controlled by particularly non-Preceptual habits, but eventually we must be willing not to judge, willing to simply see what is there and deal with it, through meditation and the Precepts, through ever deepening our training, and to trust that that is enough.

And sometimes letting go may involve hurling away. Don't be afraid to try, for "With the ideal comes the actual..."\* Don't get stuck, as I have sometimes done, with an unwillingness to try something because we cling to an ideal of training, to a fundamentalist conception of what training should be. We must be willing to let that go as well. It is OK to try things, knowing that we will make mistakes, as long as we are willing to accept and learn from the karmic consequences of those mistakes, and as long as we do our best to follow the Precepts in our struggle, always being careful and taking refuge in the Sangha.

However gentle or non-judgmental it may become, letting go is an active process, something that we do--involving an act of will or intention. It is not simply something that happens to us, but something that we choose. I have found, however, that it is not something that can be forced. We need to be willing to be patient and to persevere in our efforts. Also, as we train, letting go may become easier, even second nature for some karmic habits, but it may well continue to involve elements of struggle for others, so don't become discouraged if this simple act is difficult to do.

Letting go is an ever-deepening process. As we gain experience with it, and faith in our ability to do it, we make friends with it. As this is taking place, we find that simply not letting ourselves be controlled by something is not enough. We need to move on to letting go of the longing that impels the clinging. However much we may zealously guard ourselves against a particular mistake, as long as we continue to allow ourselves to cling to the underlying desire or aversion, as long as we continue to allow our interested attention to wander to the object of that desire or aversion, as long as we continue to cultivate even the slightest longing in our hearts, that clinging will continue to exert control over us. Part of the ever-deepening process of letting go is seeing how we cultivate this clinging on more and more subtle levels.

In not getting stuck with the ideal, we need to be willing to accept our humanity: to compassionately accept that as long as we are alive, these old habits will continue to be a part of us, so the effort to let go will be a life-long process. This will afford us the opportunity to continue to see new, and often subtler, aspects of our karmic habits, our clings. Thus, if we are willing, we may come to know them more and more intimately, and through this insight to gain more skillful means to deal with them, to convert them, to let them go.

Training simply involves doing the best that we can at any time. As we persevere, we (usually) do better. As we *actively choose* to develop the courage to keep the Precepts, to be willing to meditate in difficult (or easy) circumstances, to cultivate the mind that seeks the Way, we develop the faith and patience that help us to persevere. We begin to gain the perspective that the Buddha-Dharma actually works, and it even works for us. This is the Buddha's blessing to all of us. Accept it with bows.

Yours in the Dharma,  
Rev. Rokuzan Kroenke  
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\*from **Sandokai** in *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, Shasta Abbey Press, 1990, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Rev., p. 60