

“Living Meditation Living Insight” by Dr. Thynn Thynn

Letting Go and Picking Up

Student: Why is “letting go” so important in Buddhism?

Thynn: The term “letting go” has become a catchword in Buddhist circles.

It is true that “letting go” is crucial for arriving at self-realization of inner freedom, but you have to understand how to let go.

Student: What are we supposed to let go of?

Thynn: Let go of your clinging. Let go of the motivating desire behind whatever you’re doing. It may be a desire to succeed, to be perfect, to control others or to glorify yourself. It doesn’t matter what it is specifically; what matters is the desire behind your act. It is easy to mistake the act for the desire.

To let go is to let go of clinging to desire, not to let go of the act.

We have been talking about stopping and looking at emotions. Try to stop and look at an act; see if you can identify the desire propelling it. When you see the desire, you can also detect the clinging to the desire. When you see the clinging, you see it resolve and you spontaneously let go.

Student: There are so many things in life I don’t want to renounce or let go of.

Thynn: Of course not. We don’t let go for the sake of letting go. There is a parable about a Zen master who was approached by a pupil. The pupil asked, “I have nothing in my mind now; what shall I do next?” “Pick it up,” replied the master. This is an excellent example of the negation that comes with proper understanding, as opposed to pure nihilism.

If we are bound to the concept of letting go, then we are not free. When we are not free, understanding pañña (insight, wisdom) does not arise. But if we truly see the clinging to desire and let go of it, our act becomes a pure act, without any attendant tensions or frustrations. When the act is pure and simple, we can accomplish more with less stress. At that point, you are “picking up” just as you are “letting go.”

Student: Why is letting go so difficult? I can watch my other emotions like anger and hatred, but it is much harder to see desire and clinging.

Thynn: That’s because desire and clinging precede anger and hatred. In any fit of emotion — and our mental formations occur so very fast — we can only identify gross emotions like anger and hatred. Desire and clinging are much more subtle, so it takes stronger samadhi (concentration attained in higher meditation) to be able to see them.

You have been conditioned since you were very young to relate everything to yourself. As soon as you learn to recognize people and things, you’re taught how to relate these to the “I” and “mine”— my mom, my dad, my toy, etc. As you grow up you’re taught how to relate ideas and concepts to yourself. You have to learn that so that you can function properly in society.

But at the same time, this process slowly and unconsciously creates a concept of selfhood, and you build up your ego. This buildup is strengthened by the values of society. You learn to compete, to achieve, to accumulate knowledge, wealth and power. In other words, you are trained to possess and to cling.

By the time you are grown up, the concept of ego-self has become so real that it is difficult to tell what is illusion and what is reality. It is difficult to realize that “I” and “mine” are temporary, relative and changeable. The same is true of all that is related to “I” and “mine.” Not understanding that “I” and “mine” are temporary, you struggle to keep them permanent; you cling to them. This desire to try to keep everything permanent is what makes it so difficult to learn to let go.

Student: I have trouble accepting the Buddhist idea of self as an illusion.

Thynn: You have become so used to functioning with the “I” and “mine,” so used to thinking your “self” is real, that it is naturally difficult to understand the Buddhist way of thinking. The “I” and “mine,” being illusions themselves, survive only by clinging to illusions of their own making. They cling to all kinds of mental possessions — be they power, wealth, status or whatever — which are themselves conceptual creations of the mind with no substantial reality. In short, they are also illusions.

Student: If “I” is an illusion and not reality, how can “I” get rid of the “I”?
How can you get rid of something that never was?

Student: I feel that if I let go of “I” and “mine,” I would lose my identity.
How can I exist if I let go of everything? Won’t I become cold and unfeeling?
It sounds scary, like living in a vacuum.

Thynn: You have to understand that what you lose is merely an illusion. It never was. You empty the mind of illusion about self. Just let go of the illusion.

In fact, you are not losing anything. You just remove an imaginary screen before your eyes. In the process you gain wisdom, or pañña. From this wisdom unfold the four virtues of unconditional love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. These virtues manifest themselves as concern, humanness and sensitivity to others. When you have pañña (insight, wisdom) you can fully experience the beauty and warmth that is within all human relationships.

That is why letting go is not losing your illusory ego. You are actually uncovering a great treasure.