

Letting Go©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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You may have noticed that the words of our first hymn this morning would seem to be in opposition to my sermon topic, letting go. Just a few minutes ago we sang just as long as I have breath, I must answer yes to life, to truth and to love. So you might be wondering about or even questioning my hymn choice this morning. One of the things I appreciate about Unitarian Universalists is that we often engage in wondering about and questioning all types of things—things that many people just accept without a second thought or reservation. While it isn't apparent, there is an aspect to this hymn that very clearly illustrates both the practice and the importance of letting go. I could simply tell you what this aspect is but I think allowing you to experience it for yourself would be a better way to go. If you are willing to participate in a very short activity to discover this aspect of the hymn, I invite you to inhale a full breath—and then hold it. Hold it as long as it is beneficial to you or, if you prefer, as long as you possibly can.

To make sure we didn't lose anyone as a result of that activity, I would ask everyone who is still breathing to please raise your hand. Check to make sure those who are sitting beside you are breathing. If you notice anyone who has stopped breathing please shout out so we can call an ambulance. Okay, I am glad you are all still with me.

This exercise helps us recognize that in order to say yes to life, to truth and to love, we need to continually be letting go. What makes it possible for us to sing this hymn, or any hymn, is the fact that we let go of each and every breath we take in. It is during the exhale, the time when we are letting go of our breath, that we are able to make the music come alive with our voices. If we were unable to let go of a breath for more than a few minutes, that particular inhale would be our last breath. Life itself depends on maintaining the proper balance between getting or taking in, holding on, only briefly, and then letting go.

If only letting go in all aspects of our life was as easy and as natural as letting go is as we breath. As I made the decision to talk about letting go today, I thought about the many areas of my life where I haven't yet found the balance—areas where letting go would make my life simpler, happier, and considerably less stressful. With that knowledge in the forefront of my mind I thought it might be beneficial for us to consider how all of us might benefit from learning to let go.

Buddhism is a religious tradition that has a great deal to offer when it comes to the subject of letting go. While I have done some study of Buddhist teachings and practices, I am not a practicing Buddhist. My study however, has led me to the conclusion that there is a great deal of wisdom in the ancient tradition—wisdom about letting go that I could benefit from. Hopefully what I am about to share will be beneficial to many of us gathered here today.

We can get a sense of how important learning to let go is in Buddhism by looking at the basic precepts of the tradition. The Buddha taught that there are Four Noble Truths. They are; 1. the truth of suffering; 2. the truth of the origin of suffering; 3. the

truth of the cessation of suffering; and 4. the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering. The First Noble Truth teaches that suffering is something every person experiences as a part of life. It is in the Second, Third and Fourth Noble Truths that we begin to discover how important the concept of letting go is to the Buddhist. According to the Buddha, the origin of suffering is our craving. We respond to our craving by grasping at and clinging on to, or alternatively pushing away from, all manner of things. Letting go of our desires, our grasping at and clinging on to is a fundamental aspect of the Third Noble Truth—the truth of the cessation of suffering. And the path to the cessation of suffering? The path, or at least a significant aspect of the path, is developing the practice of letting go. In one Buddhist sacred text the Buddha is quoted as saying, “whatever is not yours: let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term happiness and benefit” (Majhima Nikaya 22).

I think I can safely say that every one of us would like to reduce or even eliminate suffering. That includes the suffering we experience as well as the suffering of others. And I am certain all of us would like more happiness. But as we all know, reducing or eliminating suffering and increasing happiness isn’t always easy and it doesn’t happen as quickly as we might like. We can’t just take a pill to make our suffering go away. A pill might dull the pain for a while but sooner or later the pain and the suffering becomes apparent again.

So if taking a pill won’t work, what will. According to Buddhist teaching, the first step is awareness. We begin the work of addressing suffering when we recognize what we are grasping at and/or clinging to. The Buddha taught that there are four kinds of clinging. Each of these kinds could be the subject of a full sermon. Today I will mention just two of the four.

The first kind of clinging involves sensual pleasures. Often this involves material things—things that fill our senses with pleasure, at least momentarily. We often continue to hang on to such material things even though they are no longer giving us pleasure. In fact, we can end up holding on to possessions even when we have no need or use for them at all. This is when we might become aware of the suffering that is connected to holding on to such material possessions. It is likely that many or possibly all of us can think of some material things we have held on to far longer than was beneficial.

I knew a man many years ago who told me how he began to come to terms with this type of grasping and clinging. As a young adult this fellow was a true believer in the statement you may have seen pasted on the bumper of some car or pickup—“the person with the most toys wins.” This fellow owned all sorts of toys and I’m not talking about children’s toys. His garage was jam-packed with motorized and non-motorized toys for every season. In fact, he had so many toys they wouldn’t all fit in the family’s three car garage. And that wasn’t the worst of it. None of the vehicles the family drove regularly would fit in the garage either. This fellow told me that after years of maintaining all of those toys he finally realized he had become a slave to them. He came to understand that the process of having material things goes two ways—you possess them, and at some point they possess you. I remember him telling me how much relief he got when he began letting go of things. He came to recognize that the kind of

winning the statement spoke of didn't matter as it had before. As he let go of his collection of toys he had much more time to do the things that gave meaning to his life.

This is where the second type of clinging the Buddha spoke of comes in. The second type of clinging involves what might be referred to as views or beliefs. All of us have views and beliefs that we hold and I would imagine all of us have had multiple opportunities to let go of some of our views and beliefs over the course of life. As I previously mentioned, this fellow was a true believer in the statement about toys. He had found his sense of personal value in winning as defined in the statement. When he began letting go of his toys he began to perceive himself in a new way. Previously his sense of personal value was based almost entirely on his material possessions. Letting go of his toys helped him begin to change his view about himself. For the first time in his life this fellow had begun to feel about himself what our First Principle speaks of—the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

I share this story with you because I believe it speaks to the benefit of learning to let go. It also seems to affirm at least some of what the Buddha taught. My hope is that this story may also be a mirror for each of us to look into. A mirror in which we can see aspects of our own lives. I know for me there are material possessions I have been holding on to for way too long. I also know that I have views and beliefs about all manner of topics and situations that aren't accurate or beneficial. Knowing that I have material possessions, views and beliefs that I would benefit by letting go of is a first step. But another step is needed. The next step is learning how to let go.

The Fourth Noble Truth of Buddhism goes into great detail about learning to let go by practicing what is called "The Eightfold Path" or the "Middle Way." I couldn't do the Eightfold Path justice with a dozen sermons let alone the few minutes I have left. At some point in the future I will likely address one or more of these eight aspects of this path. Today, however, I want to have us consider one way we might take steps along this path, even if we haven't studied it. Here we return to our first hymn, "Just as Long as I Have Breath." It is claimed that the Buddha said, "One moment spent in the act of meditation is equal to the reading of a thousand teachings." Quite possibly the most common approach to meditation is focusing attention on the breath. When we focus on our breath, we draw on an inherent wisdom that each of us has about the power, the process and the benefit of letting go. What benefit might letting go hold for us? In one Buddhist sacred text the Buddha is quoted as saying, "whatever is not yours: let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term happiness and benefit" (Majhima Nikaya 22). As we focus on our breath we can begin to notice how thoughts and feelings come to our attention. With practice we can learn to notice these thoughts and feelings, and then, just like with our breath, we can let them go. With practice, letting go of such thoughts and feelings will become easier, just as letting go of each breath is easy.

So when you find yourself clinging to thoughts, feelings or material things that are no longer of benefit to you, take a moment to focus on your breathing. Attend to how you take a breath and let it go. Then take another breath and let it go. As you keep taking breaths and letting them go, you may find yourself ready to open your mind, your heart or your hand to release what is no longer needed. My wish for all of us is that in the days ahead, we may attend to the wisdom of our breath. And by doing so we will

find it easier and easier to say yes to letting go, and in doing so, our long-term happiness and well-being will blossom like a lotus flower.

So may it be.