
WHAT IS LETTING GO?

COMMENTS ON LETTING GO BY JACK RISK

“Just open your hand,” Sifu says.

There’s a lot about “letting go” that has to do with surrendering control. Sometimes this can be relatively easy as when we, for instance, relax voluntary muscles. But how easy is it to get past the “me” I habitually present to the world? Or to abandon desires that are so basic I’m usually not aware of them. Or to stop holding onto a fear I’ve had since childhood?

For me “letting go” has a lot to do with the idea of “non-intention.” The Daoist term wuwei means “no conscious effort.” Here’s a couple of quotes from the Daodejing:

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*The weakest thing in the world
Overcomes the strongest thing in the world
What doesn’t exist finds room where there’s none
Thus we know help comes with no effort
Wordless instruction
Effortless help
Few in the world can match this.*

(Translated by Red Pine.)

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*To hold on to softness is called strength.
...Holding on to strength does not make one strong; it is holding on to softness that makes one strong.*

(Translated by John Lynn.)

63
*Act without acting
Work without working
Understand without understanding...*

(Translated by Red Pine.)

When Master Yap talks about the xin fa (the way of the heart) he’s laying out for us this effortless action ideal:

- Switch off thoughts and emotions
- Bring the awareness to the body—be present
- Use no strength, train to be effortless—wuwei (non-doing)
- Hold no intention—not even the intention to be healed
- Be detached: no anxiety, doubt, judgment or reaction; no excitement
- Aim for equanimity: calmness, stillness, peace

Effortless action seems like a paradox. How is it possible to try not to try? How, in seeking to cultivate ourselves, is it possible to strive spiritually and have it result in a state beyond striving?

Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism in China had a famous and prolonged dispute about whether enlightenment came spontaneously (suddenly) or whether it was the result of gradual training. The concept of wuwei underlies this argument.

The Chinese ideal of wuwei speaks of action that is spontaneous and at the same time accords with "nature" (by which they used to mean the normative context, the order of the cosmos). Effortless action describes the mental state of the actor not just how actions appear to others. It is a state of harmony within the person in which actions flow freely and immediately from spontaneous inclinations but also are appropriate to the conditions at hand.

Master Yap is the only person I have known who embodies this ideal. I often marvel at the economy of energy in his actions. There is a sense of effortless ease. But we know that this is the result of training—training the body and the mind.

Intentionality is an important concept when it comes to understanding karma. The Buddhist take on intentionality goes right to the root of what it means "to know." We are impermanent and without self-nature. There is no enduring self that sits back and has information come into it from "outside." Rather, when we sense objects, using our physical senses, there is something cognitive already happening. We "grasp" things in an active process of appropriating them, making them ours. What we grasp is transformed, tainted by our grasping. We give objects value by virtue of the fact that we desire them actively.

So, there are the grasper and the grasped in the act of knowing. The mind is always actively appropriating objects and transforming them. This is the karma creation process. Karma, too, is impermanent but it has a way of keeping itself cycling within us and taking part in the ongoing process of knowing—in the karma creation process. Vasubandhu, the Yogacara philosopher, held that it was only between these two—the grasper and the grasped—that we could find an opening to break the hold of karma on us. We have to stop knowing, desiring, grasping and appropriating things.

How to do it? Only through meditation. But it must be whole-hearted letting go, surrendering totally, not holding onto anything, letting go of the subtlest—and therefore the strongest—"holding on."

I find this very hard to do but I think it's what it's all about.

Please allow me to share a couple of quotes from two great Ch'an masters:

I will let go with both hands, for then I shall certainly discover the Buddha in my Mind (Huangbo).

In upright practice let go from the edge of the high cliff, not grabbing anything. The ropes around your feet are severed. In wholeness take one step. The buddhas and ancestors all do not reach one's own genuine, wondrously illuminating field, which is called one's self (Hongzhi Zhengjue).

COMMENTS ON LETTING GO BY MASTER YAP¹

Letting go can only be practiced during meditation.

¹ These comments are a slightly edited version of a posting on the CFQ Forum, October 2011.

The effect of practice becomes converted to everyday life outside of practice through mindfulness. It allows for a natural ability to make choices when we are confronted by events and life situations. This ability involves the mind's becoming detached enough to analyze and take account of the implications of thoughts and situations that present themselves. Also, to foresee the outcomes of decisions that are made. The choice of actions is based on reasonable and predictable positive outcomes. Letting go in everyday life is not about letting go of everything. Rather, it's a careful and wise selection of which actions should be discarded and what should be chosen. It's about selecting the right actions that lead to the right effects. Without making a choice and without taking actions to live, life turns into despair. This is the opposite of what letting go means.

Untrained minds "grab on" in every situation, without discrimination. The more silly, irrelevant and destructive situations have the greatest appeal because they give a big shake up in the emotions. Zombies need painful whips to keep moving!

Do not talk about letting go as if it can be done without presence cultivated through meditation. It cannot be done.

When the mind chooses to grab onto something, letting go literally means killing yourself.

Meditation training is all about letting go. A switch into meditation reveals energetic forces of karma. They all exist because they have been "grabbed" or held in. Meditation is about spending time to no longer be grabbing onto or interested in them any longer. Whatever appears—whether ideas, thoughts, emotions, images or physical sensations—realize that you no longer wish to get involved. To do so you have to recognise that you are a "worker toward presence," to be moving toward a place here and now. This is the only effective way to stand out against countless demands for attention. These demands are hard attractions. Do not become attracted by wonderful or beautiful attractions. Neither pick a fight or quarrel with painful or merciless attractions.

This attitude of continuing with your work, walking your journey despite all the temptations or challenges is what softness means.

Equipped with the right understanding, willingness, sincerity and determination, you become enabled to catch yourself getting attracted to or grabbing onto the voices, thoughts, ideas, emotions and pictures put to you by karma, and quietly return to your work/journey. The way to do this is similar to opening your hand to drop a pen.

This way you find yourself. Yourself stands out against countless voices claiming to be yourself. Recognizing yourself in this way is the first step toward eventual realisation that a distinctive self-nature does not exist, because phenomena of the world are made of fleeting, ever-changing (impermanent) karma.

The experience of "me the worker" provides clarity, rules and ethics that help to eliminate overblown ego, enable a purposeful and meaningful life free from self-invited disasters, and provide zestful, productive attitudes in living your life.