

Letting Go and Non-Attachment

By Richard Harvey

What does it mean to 'let go?' Here in the wake of 100 years of New Age thinking, many ideas have been misunderstood, taken for granted, or used to give a feeling of wellbeing and liberation, without any real substance. A good example for such a misinterpretation is the notion of letting go.

Letting go means releasing, dropping, freeing yourself. It could refer to anything. But in the aftermath of the humanistic psychotherapy and western spiritual movement it has come to mean that since we are attached to certain phenomena and these attachments limit us, by releasing and letting go of our attachments, we can liberate ourselves from their limiting effects. For example, if you feel jealousy, you suffer, so letting go of jealousy is positive. If you feel vengeful, you suffer, so letting go of vengeance and anger, you feel happier, and so on. Other positive conditional states like contentment, pleasure, and positivity are considered good... and therefore you don't need to let go of them!

But, when we look at what letting go could really mean it looks rather different. How do you genuinely let go? What do you need to let go of? What is it alright to keep a hold of?

A human being can become attached to almost anything. Memories, photos, past pleasures, nostalgia, pain, reliving former glories, the past, anger, yesterday, tomorrow, future plans, anticipating, reminiscing, melancholy, past relationships, sentimental recall, even negative experiences and hurtful scenarios. If you are in a lower state of consciousness then these attachments are inconsequential and unremarkable, just unremarkable conditions of your life and you accept them unquestioningly. But if you are seriously interested in liberation and concerned about becoming a fully human and spiritual being on this earth, under this sky, it must all go – everything! You must be prepared to live fully and totally, and that means letting go of, not only apparently negative states, but positive ones as well. Let go of everything outside of the present moment. Why?

Let me take you one step back. Why are you attached? You are attached out of fear; attachment and fear are the same for you. You have not learned to trust life, so fearing the future you cling to the past. You worry, plan, and panic about what is to come while you remain cloyingly dependent on what has been through nostalgia and idealization. What you should have let go of, you want again, you want to return to the past and you get your wish, because the past plays and replays in your life and is reflected in your future. Look carefully! What you have forfeited is your life, for the present gets no look-in. You have missed the present experience in your concern for what has been and what is to come.

Yet life gives you everything you want, everything you need and more when you live it totally, fully. Because it is only here and now that you are living, that you are alive, liberated, and free to breathe and experience completely, without fear in this present moment. No one who loves you truly would want you to hang on, to be attached. So when you leave any person, any condition or circumstance, do it totally, let go with all your heart, so your heart is present with you in the next experience, the new condition, the fresh meeting. You become like nature and you are a part of nature. You are perfectly natural, but not when you are holding on and attached; then you need to let go.

To let go, to really let go is to enter a new world of love instead of fear, since letting go is an exercise in shedding fear. The “how to” let go is therefore very simple.

You must feel your emotions as deeply as possible. When you feel them totally, emotions will naturally flow, change, or release. You simply stand as a witness, don't judge, try not to want them to do anything other than what they need to do. This is the kind of implicit trust we have in the healing process as children, but which we learn to distrust over time due to our early conditioning. So, feel everything fully, do not interfere, simply breathe and watch, and your release from long-held emotions will come about, because it is what emotions do naturally: they flow! And flowing is how you let go.

In essence, the inner journey is a process of loss. In my own case I reached a phase of life where I attained equanimity through shedding attachment to the therapist label, to where I lived what I did, offering up my will, having fewer and fewer preferences, less desires, and personal ambitions. This coincided with the fulfillment of the dreams that had been causing me suffering for many years. As I watched them all coming about in my life, I understood that I didn't have to replace them with further dreams. I didn't want to dream anymore and I didn't need to. My life changed as I deepened into the life of authenticity and, as I found the inner strength to let go progressively and profoundly. I experienced a new expansive freedom as a consequence of it. There were still some dark corners however. The challenges of clearing those dark corners are remarkably acute, sharp, and painful. But over time I cleared them and stabilized in a new phase of life that I have come to call the second stage of awakening.

The final paradox is that you seek enlightenment, but enlightenment only is... when you are not. This is fundamental and it is fundamentally obfuscating and confusing – surely the ultimate dilemma. But what deep sense it makes. Consider desire... an endless tunnel of frustration since you cannot possibly want what you want once you have got it... a desire that would be the death of desire. Desire feeds upon itself, as every restless human being should know! Here, in the reality of the enlightened state, we have not the opposite, which is merely the flip-side, but a trans-dimensional leap: to have what you want you must pay with everything you have. How? By letting go... totally. Through the sadhana or spiritual practice of letting go and surrender, we can reach the state of non-attachment.

Ouspensky was Gurdjieff's follower or disciple. Gurdjieff was an early 20th century spiritual master. He was controversial, uncompromising, and extraordinarily authentic. Ouspensky recalls a train journey with the master. They were travelling from New York to San Francisco. Gurdjieff began to behave like a drunkard, not drunk but behaving like a drunkard. He wandered through the compartments of the train, waking people up, and throwing their belongings around. Ouspensky followed and anxiously tried to placate him, but Gurdjieff was not listening.

Finally, somebody pulled the train's emergency chain. The ticket collector and the guard appeared. Ouspensky apologized for Gurdjieff, saying that he couldn't explain, because he didn't understand himself, but that Gurdjieff was not mad or drunk. Just then in front of the guard and the ticket collector Gurdjieff flung somebody's suitcase through the window. The guard decided this was enough. He instructed Ouspensky to keep Gurdjieff in the compartment, lock it from the inside, and stay there, otherwise they would both be set off the train at the next station. Ouspensky was embarrassed and angry at Gurdjieff's unexplained behavior. As the officials left, Gurdjieff was ranting loudly in Russian. But as soon as the compartment door closed he became mysteriously silent and smiled.

He said to Ouspensky, “How are you?”

Ouspensky said, "You are asking me? How are you?! You would have forced them to put you in jail, and me too, because I couldn't leave you in such a condition. What was the purpose of all of this?"

Gurdjieff said, "That is for you to understand. I am doing everything for you, and you are asking me the purpose? The purpose is not to react, not to be embarrassed, not to be enraged. What is the point of feeling embarrassed? What are you going to get out of it? You are simply losing your cool and gaining nothing."

"But," said Ouspensky, "You threw that suitcase out of the window. Now what about the man whose suitcase it is?"

Gurdjieff said, "Don't worry, it was yours!"

Alongside the wonderful demonstration of reaction versus non-reaction, an important message of this story is that non-attachment practice is almost impossible to practice deeply on your own. A teacher, a mentor who is committed to your spiritual growth can help enormously. But he or she will not always be thanked.

My first teacher used to tease me mercilessly. When I returned from India and insisted on wearing my Indian clothes he taunted me, when I got a new girlfriend he kept saying she was not good-looking enough for me, when I whined about not having enough money he goaded me. I hated him, but he was always right. He saw my games, my self-pity, my pathos, my manipulations, my weaknesses, my cowardliness and underneath, my anger, my resentment, my fears, and my neediness. I was in a stage of psycho-spiritual growth in which he knew me much better than I did.

Non-attachment is one of the major authentic spiritual practices, which may lead you to the point of desperation or a feeling of the deepest threat. Just remember what we discussed earlier that we even have to let go of the road, of the means to truth. Being attached is so commonplace in the present era, as an inherent feature of the achievement and gain-oriented society, while letting go is understood so very poorly. Everything is about defining goals, setting up points in the future toward which we need to work constantly, and controlling as much as possible. However, if we decide to follow the path of real spirituality, if we embark on the journey of Truth, we have to cultivate the skills of letting go and non-attachment to the highest degree and learn to trust life again. What other period could be better for this than the current era of materialism? Materialism is irrevocably based on the attachment to the separate self, personality and character. While illusion is supported by separation via the personality, Reality is demonstrated through the impersonal.

This article is an excerpt from Richard Harvey's book [Your Divine Opportunity](#).