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# Letting Go Within Action

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A Dhamma reflection by Ajahn Jayasaro
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One of Luang Por Chah's most well-known teachings is that of letting go. And one of the key phrases that he used to explain what letting go means, and how it is to be developed, is that we should let go 'within action'. This immediately reminds us that letting go is not a refraining from action, not passivity, but that the letting go takes place within the action itself.

As monks and nuns in this Thai Forest Tradition, we may sometimes find ourselves accused of attachment to the Vinaya, attachment to a discipline. This is a difficult accusation to refute. If someone says you are attached to the Vinaya, does that mean you have to stop keeping the precepts in order to prove that you're not really attached to them? I think a distinction needs to be made between attachment, and devotion or loyalty.

Indeed, in Pali there is an interesting distinction between two important words: *upādāna* and *samādāna*. *Upādāna* is a word with which many of you will be familiar, the word that we usually translate as 'attachment' or 'clinging'. *Samādāna* is a word that appears in the precepts.[1] It's the word for taking on a precept. The difference is that with *upādāna* we attach through ignorance. With *samādāna*, we hold on to something with wisdom, we hold on to it for as long as it needs to be held. Ajahn Chah would explain this by saying that it's not that you don't take hold of the object. For instance, you take hold of a water bottle, tip the bottle until you have as much water as you need and then put it down. If you don't hold on to the bottle at all, you are not going to get any water into the glass. So *samādāna* is the taking up of something, taking on, undertaking a precept or practice with wisdom. Or having undertaken it, one relates to it with devotion and loyalty.

Letting go doesn't mean that we don't take on responsibilities, that we don't take on practices, but that we let go within those practices. What exactly is it that we let go of? We let go of the five *khandhas*. They are body, feelings, perceptions, thoughts – wholesome and unwholesome *dhammas*[2] in the mind – and sense-consciousness. When we say we let go of them, this is a shorthand phrase meaning letting go of the craving and clinging to those things through ignorance. But wherever we are, whoever we are, whatever practice we are undertaking, we are always dealing with these five *khandhas* or aggregates.

We let go of our attachment to the physical body. That doesn't mean

we are negligent or don't take medicine when we get sick, but that we examine our minds and are careful not to identify with the physical body. The pressure upon us to do so is very strong, particularly in the present day. In previous times most people lived in quite small communities with not much opportunity for travel, notably in Thailand, but even in the Western world before the industrial revolution. The number of times when you would be confronted with an image of someone more attractive than you would be quite small. But these days, particularly if you are living in the world, everywhere you go you are bombarded with images of attractive people. Whether it's on billboards and television, or in magazines and newspapers, you are constantly being tempted to compare yourself, compare your body with those bodies, and to feel discontented with your body. In particular, it's been the unfortunate lot of women throughout history to be brainwashed or pressurized into measuring their worth as human beings by the attractiveness of their body.

Of course, if you identify with the body, you're identifying with something that is going to betray you. The body is not a good friend. You do everything for the body, look after it so diligently, spend so much time looking after it … you're so kind to your body, but in the end how does it repay you? It grows old, gets sick, falls apart and dies. This is a reminder of the fundamental truth to which we should turn our minds again and again and again: nothing lasts. That's such a powerful phrase. It's a reminder of a very simple truth, the simple truth of *anicca*, impermanence. There is nothing that lasts. And it's through turning our minds to very simple truths that we recognize the resistance to them which we all have.

How much do we crave for things to last, at least the things we like? We see the stories, romances: moonlit night, young man, young woman, 'I wish this night could last forever.' Why might they say that? Because they know that it doesn't last. Because the moonlit night and that intensity of romantic emotion don't last, there comes this expression of, 'If only this could last forever, if only we could just freeze this moment in time.' But we can't. Nothing lasts.

This body doesn't last. So the more we invest our sense of dignity, self-worth and identity in the body, the more we are setting ourselves up for pain. It's not a matter of adopting a particular attitude towards the body, but of being willing to look at it very clearly. When we look at other people's bodies, we can notice how particular, how biased we are,

how much we tend to dwell on certain aspects of the body and try to turn our minds away from the other aspects. The mind is drawn to those aspects of the body that are exciting, stimulating, that we find beautiful. When we find someone attractive, certain parts of their physical appearance appeal to us.

We very rarely fall in love with earwax or snot or things like that. 'I was just walking along the road and I saw a beautiful girl, her nose was running and her snot just glistened in the sunlight … and I knew that was love.' It isn't! But snot and earwax are every bit as much part of the body as the hair, the breasts, the legs, whatever men and women find attractive in each other's bodies. So if we look, we see the extent to which our appreciation of a physical body is one-sided. This is not saying that we should be miserable and look at everybody as having dirty, disgusting bodies. But we look to see whether or not our appreciation of the body is one-sided, because when it is one-sided it is dominated by ignorance. And wherever there is ignorance, there is craving. Wherever there is craving, there is attachment. Wherever there is attachment, there is suffering. So we're attached to the body, and we try to find ways to recognize that attachment, to see the suffering inherent in the attachment. And from that, the impetus, the *chanda*,[3] the will towards letting go of that attachment will arise.

Similarly with feeling; see how much of our lives are dominated by *vedanā*, feelings, how much they constrict our conduct. How many times do we turn away from wholesome, noble, beautiful actions simply because we fear the *dukkha-vedanā*, the unpleasant feelings, that we might have to encounter while performing those actions? How often do we perform actions which we know in our heart of hearts are going to lead to pain – actions that are foolish, are trivial, are ignoble – merely because of the thirst for the pleasant feelings that will arise in performing them? How often do we betray our own ideals simply through the weakness that manifests as the love of pleasant feeling and the aversion to and fear of unpleasant feeling?

In modern society, probably one of the most underrated and forgotten virtues is that of patience – patient endurance. One of the advantages of wealth is thought to be the freedom it gives us from the necessity to put up with things that we don't like, while having everything at our fingertips whenever we want it, as soon as we want it. Even as monastics, sometimes we say, 'Oh, it was terrible, but at least I got some patient endurance from it.' It's like a kind of booby prize. If we

don't get anything else from it, at least we got a little bit of patient endurance. Patience is not a virtue that anybody, even monastics these days, tends to encourage. And yet when we read the *ovāda pāṭimokkha*,[4] what does the Buddha say? He says that patient endurance, *khanti*, is the supreme incinerator of defilements.

Logically speaking, if you are sincerely intent on the complete eradication of defilements, when someone acts in a really irritating way and you just have to be patient, you should be extremely grateful to them because they are helping you to incinerate your defilements. When you find yourself in the position of having to exercise patience, that doesn't mean you're not practising, or that it's some kind of auxiliary, secondary practice. It's the heart of practice. But there is a point to be made here, that the true patience, *khanti*, is one in which there is no sense of time. If you're gritting your teeth, thinking 'How many more minutes?' and 'When is this going to be over?' that's not really *khanti*. When there is *khanti*, there isn't that sense of time. It is the perfection of patience.

There is a wonderful phrase of Luang Por Sumedho's: 'Peaceful co-existence with the unpleasant.' Observe your attitude to pleasant and unpleasant feeling, and find a way to let go of it. Of course, when we meditate, we intend and aim towards peace, tranquillity, clarity of mind. But at the same time we should recognize that meditation is the way in which we confront or meet with ourselves. It's as if we put our mind under a microscope. And one of the things that we should be very interested in looking at in meditation is our attitude, our reaction or response to pleasant and unpleasant feeling.

What usually happens when your leg, your knee or your back starts to hurt during meditation? Do you get depressed? Do you get upset? Do you become anxious? Do you feel averse? What kinds of reactions arise? If those negative reactions habitually arise when you experience a pain in your body while sitting, you can be quite sure that those same reactions arise in your daily life when you must endure something unpleasant, whether it's physical or mental. In meditation you are exposing, and being able to look much more clearly at, the quite complex mental reactions to experiences that take place in daily life, but as if it were in a laboratory.

Similarly with pleasant feeling. Some meditators are surprisingly afraid of pleasant feeling, afraid of getting carried away with it, afraid

of becoming absorbed into it, attached to it. People may experience this fear to the extent where they don't really penetrate the meditation object as much as they should. There's fear of an overwhelming bliss. Sometimes the need to be in control can be even stronger than the movement towards inner peace and happiness. But the path to liberation, the path to the comprehension of suffering, can only be fully followed, and suffering can only be truly understood, by a happy mind, *sukha*. If you don't have a happy mind, it's always 'my suffering'. The only way that you can comprehend suffering as a Noble Truth is when you are not suffering, when you are feeling happy, content and at ease, at least on the level of *vedanā*. So *sukha* is part of the Path. And the meditator, the practitioner, is seeking a wise, intelligent relationship with pleasant feeling. This is the letting go of pleasant feeling. Experiencing pleasant feeling as pleasant feeling: it's just that much, no more, no less. It's a beautiful thing, but it's not the highest thing. Yet we can appreciate it and make use of it on the Path.

Letting go of unpleasant and pleasant feelings doesn't mean that we have to turn away from them, or to become unfeeling. Far from it. But there's the sense of awakening to the nature of unpleasant, pleasant and neutral feeling. For most of us there is constant discontent and unease in the mind because of a lack of clarity around feeling. If someone says, 'Look, I'm going to give you a bit of unpleasant feeling … a bit of pain, just a tiny bit. Would you like it?' 'No.' Nobody would. 'I'll give you a little bit of bliss, just a tiny bit of bliss, just a little weenie bit of bliss.' 'Yes, please!' That's a reflection of this movement within the mind.

One of the values of *samādhi* and the unshakeability of mind that comes about through development of it, is the extremely enhanced ability to be with things without grasping on to them, and to see feeling as feeling: pleasant feeling and unpleasant feeling. This is something in which we're interested. So if you're sitting and you've got some aches and pains, that doesn't mean you can't meditate. This is what it's about. It's about coming to dwell more fully, more completely; to be awakening to present reality and learning to let go within feeling.

We all have memories, perceptions – *saññā*. But often the way we conduct our lives is too conditioned by perceptions, and by how we carry around with us ideas that are often unexamined; ideas about people, situations, monasteries and so forth. I remember once speaking with a monk who was criticizing another monk. (Yes, even

monks do that sometimes.) He said, 'Oh, such and such monk is coming to stay and he's not a very nice monk. He's got this bad quality and that bad quality.' And I said, 'Oh, you know him very well, do you?' He said, 'Yes, we spent a Rains Retreat together five years ago.' And so he had this monk completely worked out, mapped out on the basis of a period of three months five years previously. This is a good example of how we see other human beings as selves, as something fixed and immutable, whereas in fact we are changing beings. There's nothing fixed, nothing immutable about us at all. And this is particularly the case for those on the path of practice.

In Thailand, and indeed in many countries, fortune tellers and palmists are very popular. But good palmists will refuse to look at the palm of someone who is meditating, practising very hard. They say that when someone starts to meditate, all bets are off, as it were. They are not confident that they can predict the future of someone who has started to practise at the level of *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*, the inner-outer practice in simultaneous harmony. Something changes, change takes place. The Buddha expressed this beautifully on a number of occasions. When those who were formerly heedless turn away from heedlessness, and become heedful, embark on the path of practice, they are so beautiful. They illumine the world like the full moon appearing from behind the clouds. This is perhaps one of the essential and most characteristic of Buddhist teachings – the sense that we can change. Our future is not determined by God or gods or faith or stars. It's determined by our own actions of body, speech and mind. We are capable of taking responsibility for our lives and effecting real, lasting changes – amazing changes – if we follow the Eightfold Path that the Buddha laid down for us; not picking and choosing, but the whole package, the whole vast array of teachings.

So recognize to what extent we are limited by perceptions, by memories. We'll have perceptions of ourselves as being hopeless, useless, inadequate (or perhaps of being very capable and brilliant and so on). But in the end these are just perceptions. For a long, long time you bought into this idea of yourself being a certain kind of person, and you thought about it so much, and dwelt on it so much, that it becomes a self-evident truth. And then one day in meditation, you suddenly see that it's just a bubble. It's just another thought. It's just another perception. It's just something that arises and passes away.

Often people come to spiritual practice, come to meditation, thinking,

‘I don’t like who I am. I’d like to be a different person.’ This idea that you are somebody you don’t really like, and you would like to be somebody else, is a wrong, mistaken and ultimately frustrating approach. Instead, when you look closely, your intention is to look and learn from what is present. Then you will see that those ideas of being ‘somebody’ are just things that arise and pass away. There’s nothing substantial to them at all. If there’s a ‘problem’, it’s not a problem.

But though you look very closely at the nature of perceptions and memories, you can’t live without them. You have to let go within memory and perception. And you let go by seeing memory and perception as just that. It’s just so much. Just this way. It’s like this. That’s the way the mind is. It works like this. And that’s all right.

The fourth *khandha* is *saṅkhāra*. It’s the *khandha* of kamma. We can talk about the five *khandhas* in different ways. Of the five *khandhas*, *rūpa* (body), *vedanā* (feelings), *saññā* (perception) and *viññāṇa* (sense experience) are *vipāka*, the results of kamma in the past. Whereas *saṅkhāra khandha* is led by, dominated by, volition. It is the *khandha* of kamma creation: *kusala* kammas and *akusala* kammas, wholesome and unwholesome actions. And volition, thought, intention are the *dhammas* that we need to let go of.

Here we make a distinction between *kusala* and *akusala*. We let go of certain kinds of volition by refusing to pay attention to them. There are certain volitions, certain trains of thought which are so poisonous that we don’t dare to allow the mind to indulge in them at all. When the mind becomes aware that these kinds of poisonous *dhammas* – thoughts of violence, of hurting or taking advantage of others, for instance – are in the mind, this calls for sharpness, for the warrior-like cutting off of those selfish, lustful, angry, destructive kinds of volitions. Here the letting go is much more forceful. It is a cutting off. With the wholesome volitions it’s a matter of taking them on but not identifying with them. We take on the practices of mindfulness, take on development of loving-kindness, take on the practice of patient endurance, of constant, unremitting effort. These are tasks we take upon ourselves, but without creating a new ‘self’ or a new ‘being’ out of them. Thus we are letting go, we are not allowing our minds to be pulled around by how things ‘should be’. Once you have an idea of how things should be, you will be affronted or disturbed by all the things that are not the way you think they should be.

Why do you consider certain people's behaviour is so offensive? Usually it's because you have an idea that they shouldn't be like that. So when the mind dwells on 'should' and 'shouldn't', you're setting yourself up for suffering. Why shouldn't people be selfish? Why shouldn't they be aggressive? Why shouldn't they do all the terrible things they do? Why not? If their minds are like that, if they look at things like that, have that kind of view, those kinds of values, why not? Such behaviour is then perfectly natural. When the causes and conditions are like that, the conduct will be like that.

The more you can see things in terms of causes and conditions, the more you can let go. If somebody speaks very harshly, you see it's because they've that way of looking at things, because they've developed that kind of habit, they've always spoken like that. The more you can see the conditions underlying the behaviour, the more you can let go.

Where does our sense of uniqueness lie? We say, 'This is who I really am. This is me. This is what makes me different from everyone else. This is what makes me special. This is what makes me who I am.' That's where delusion lies. That's where attachment lies. This neurotic need to be different, to stand out from the crowd or sink into the shadows; these are reactions to the basic need to create a safe haven, a refuge in the wrong place. We look for refuge. We look for something that is stable, safe, permanent, happy … in that which is impermanent, unstable and doesn't last. There is nothing wrong with body, nothing wrong with feelings, perceptions, thoughts, seeing, hearing, tasting, all these things. Those things are just this way. But problems arise when we demand, hope, crave for those things to provide that which they cannot provide. What we really desperately seek are permanence, happiness and stability, and those things can only be found in freedom from attachments, from penetrating the Four Noble Truths.

In Freudian psychology the religious or spiritual impulse is seen as a kind of deformation or transformation of sexual desires. From the Buddhist point of view, all strong sexual desires, lust, cravings and so on are just distortions of the deep human aspiration towards nibbāna. At the anāgāmi[5] level of practice sexual desire completely disappears, never to return.

It's not a matter of having a healthy working relationship with defilements. But defilements are there and can only exist because we

don't see things clearly. We don't recognize that within these five *khandhas* there is something in us that strives towards nibbāna, that feels pulled towards nibbāna; pulled towards letting go of all attachment to body, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, virtues and vices, and sense experience. Through practice we learn to be 'present' to the present, alive, awake to the way things are, rather than the way we think things are, the way things 'should' be. What is going on right now? What is this life? What is this present moment? What is this body? What are feelings? What are perceptions? What are thoughts? What are emotions? What are sense experiences through eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body? This is the questing, searching, questioning mind.

The Buddha didn't want us to believe in his teachings. This isn't a belief system. He has given us tools to use to penetrate the nature of our lives, and to align ourselves more and more clearly, more and more authentically, with what is really going on here and now. So we let go and see what a burden it is to be holding on to things, how heavy it is, how limiting, how dark; to be holding on to body, feelings, perceptions, all these aggregates, hoping and praying that they will give us something they can't really provide.

The more we let go, the lighter we feel, the happier we feel. It's through the happiness of letting go that the mind becomes brave enough, and has the power, to penetrate the way things are. The unhappy mind is weak, scattered, fragmented, without that inner stability of concentration. It's only through the ability to let go of indulgences like thoughts of the past or future, along with the renunciation of very small, rather trivial pleasant feelings, that the mind can penetrate into that which is deeper and profound.

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[1] The form of the word *samādāna* that appears in the precepts is *samādiyāmi*. ↩

[2] *dhamma/ā*: phenomenon/a; mental objects. ↩

[3] *chanda*: a wholesome, skilful form of desire. ↩

[4] *ovāda pāṭimokkha*: a summary of the main points of the Dhamma-Vinaya, which the Buddha gave to an assembly of 1,250 arahants that spontaneously gathered on the full moon of February, a day known in Pali as Magha Puja. ↩

5 *anāgāmi*: ‘non-returner,’ the third stage on the path to nibbāna. ↩

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