

The Spiritual Benefit of Letting Go
December 3, 2017

In her book, *The Places that Scare You*, the venerable Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, tells this story:

When I was about six years old, I received a teaching from an old woman sitting in the sun. I was walking by her house one day feeling lonely, unloved, and mad, kicking anything I could find. Laughing, she said to me, “Little girl, don’t you go letting life harden your heart.”

Right there, I received this pith instruction: we can let the circumstances of our lives harden us so that we become increasingly resentful and afraid, or we can let them soften us and make us kinder and more open to what scares us. We always have this choice.

In the bible’s book of Isaiah, Chapter 63:17 we also hear about the hardened heart:

Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you? From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you... But you were angry, and we sinned: because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

When we compare and contrast these two different views, the first thing we must acknowledge is that, as a non-theistic tradition, Buddhism places ultimate authority within the human person. As a theistic tradition, Christianity places ultimate authority outside of the human person. In other words, in one tradition, the locus of control is internal; in the other, the locus of control is external.

The moral of the Buddhist story is the little girl must choose how she will respond to life and all its hardships, disappointments, confusions, and inevitable sorrow. What kind of person she will be is ultimately up to her.

The moral of the Christian scripture is that humans made God angry and so he turned away, their hearts hardened, and they sinned all the more. The moral of this Old Testament story is that humans are in a relationship with a God who gets angry with them for being human -- a state of being in which there is no choice because each person is born into their humanity.

The French philosopher and poet, Antoine de Saint Exupéry wrote,

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye.

And so it is Unitarian Universalism encourages us to value and our humanness while we explore and learn from our life – a space in time which is overflowing with all things visible and invisible.

Like Buddhism, Unitarian Universalism encourages us to trust all our capacities and abilities, like seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, experiencing, thinking, trusting, and intuiting. And in so doing, we are contributing to the revaluing of choice.

Another aspect of Unitarian Universalism which is compatible with Buddhism, is that UU is based on an internal locus of control. Even though many of us believe in a God, the UU in us places more responsibility on our own shoulders. We accept responsibility for our own search for truth and meaning, and perhaps God is only a companionable part of our search.

When we experience fear and suffering, instead of blaming God for failing us, or blaming ourselves for failing God, we accept that we alone have the choice to let life harden us so that we become increasingly resentful and afraid. Or we can choose to find ways for life's experiences to soften us, make us kinder and our hearts more open to the transformative power of love and compassion.

The Buddha teaches about the enlightened or completely open heart. A completely open heart means each of us has the ability to feel the pain other people are experiencing. But, at the same time and without realizing it, we tend to shield ourselves because pain scares us.

In order to shield ourselves from pain, we build protective walls made out of opinions, prejudices, and rationalizations. These walls are fortified by emotions of all kinds: anger, craving, indifference, jealousy, arrogance, and pride, all because each one of us holds a deep fear of being hurt – of experiencing pain.

The ability to live without hardened heart and live instead from a completely open and compassionate heart is our true nature; but in order for our heart to reach this state of enlightenment, we must experience the rawness of hurting or even brokenness. Sometimes a broken hurting heart gives birth to anxiety and panic, or to anger, resentment and blame, all of which cause our heart to harden. But under the hard armor, there is a tenderness – a tender place of genuine sadness.

Every human being, no matter how hurtful or awful their behavior, has a place of true sadness within their heart. True sadness is a universal experience each of us holds in our hearts and is described in the Buddhist term as suffering. No one is immune from suffering and like it or not, understand it or not, suffering exists, period. Every human being has or will experience deep sadness – suffering. No one is immune.

But, the genuine heart of sadness can teach us great compassion. It can humble us when we're arrogant and soften us when we are unkind.

It awakens us when we prefer to sleep, and it can pierce through our indifference. This continual ache of the heart is a blessing that, when accepted fully, can be shared with all.

Fortunately for us, our innate ability to love completely is like a crack in the hard walls we have erected. The ability to love and be compassionate are natural openings in the barriers we have created to protect ourselves. With practice we can learn to find these openings by seizing a vulnerable moment of love, gratitude, loneliness, embarrassment, or even inadequacy. When we seize these moments, we awaken our true heart.

In her book, Chodron instructs us,

The Buddha taught that flexibility and openness bring strength, and that running from groundlessness weakens us and brings pain. But do we understand that becoming familiar with the running away is the key? Openness doesn't come from resisting our fears but from getting to know them well.

Rather than going after those walls and barriers with a sledge hammer, we pay attention to them. With gentleness and honesty, we move closer to those walls. We touch them and smell them and get to know them well. We begin a process of acknowledging our aversions and our cravings.

We become familiar with the strategies and beliefs we use to build the walls: What are the stories I tell myself? What repels me and what attracts me? We start to get curious about what's going on. Without calling what we see right or wrong, we simply look as objectively as we can. We can observe ourselves with humor, not getting overly serious, moralistic, or uptight about this investigation. Year after year, we practice remaining open and receptive to whatever arises. Slowly, very slowly, the cracks in the walls seem to widen and, as if by magic, our true loving nature is able to flow freely.

Like any spiritual discipline, learning and practicing Buddhism can be as complicated or as uncomplicated as we choose to make it. Chodron reminds us,

Even when our neurosis feels far more basic than our wisdom, even when we're feeling most confused and hopeless, the completely open heart – like the open sky – is always here, undiminished by the clouds that temporarily cover it.

Given that we are so familiar with the clouds.... We may find the Buddha's teaching hard to believe. Yet the truth is that in the midst of our suffering, in the hardest of times, we can contact this noble heart. It is always available, in pain as well as in joy. The Buddha said we are never separated from enlightenment.

Even at the times we feel most stuck, we are never alienated from the awakened state. This is a revolutionary assertion because so much that we think about ourselves comes from our own ego and is reinforced by the culture in which we live.

So much of the time, how we feel and think about others is what is bounced off the walls we have built for protection and so that is what is reflected back to us.

Just think if everyone could let go of clinging to their hardened walls which keep us apart. Albert Einstein wrote

A human being is part of the whole called by us 'the universe,' a part limited in time and space. A human person experiences themselves, their thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison ..., restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening the circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

As a spiritual discipline, Buddhism teaches us to let go – not in the sense of surrendering in a struggle with an omnipotent controlling power,

rather letting go in the sense of clearing thoughts and feelings that stick to our awareness and so cloud up our mind's eye.

Too many times we humans make things unnecessarily complicated, for example, the practice of meditation. Once you make the decision to actually do it, the first thing is to clear your mind so it appears as an endless blue sky. Once you have this clarity but you find yourself thinking about something, then the instant you become aware of the thought, detach from it. A thought is like a cloud moving across the sky, soon you aren't even aware of detaching and letting go.

Thoughts that are driven by our ego, and so to let go, to detach from them frees our breathing and allows our sense of being to become calm and then rest lightly upon each breath. The purpose of meditation is to trust our body's innate ability to be healthy.

Health is when there is balance between mind/body/spirit. When we find a meditative behavior that works for us, we give ourself the gift of time and space so awareness is able to gently illuminate the imbalances which are causing our fears.

Chodron goes on to teach us,

To become present and aware into that shaky and tender place has a transformative effect...(it is like) tapping into a spring of living water that has been temporarily encased in solid rock....

Being in this place may feel uncertain and edgy.... But when we touch the center of sorrow, when we sit with discomfort without trying to fix it, when we stay present to the pain of disapproval or betrayal and let it soften us...just to stay there, even for a moment, feels like a genuine act of kindness to ourselves... Being compassionate enough to

accommodate our own fears takes courage... and it definitely feels counterintuitive. But it's what we need to do...

Here we are with so much wisdom and tenderness, and, without even knowing it, we cover it over to protect ourselves from insecurity. Although we have the potential to experience the freedom of a butterfly, we mysteriously prefer the small and fearful cocoon of ego.

The Buddhist teacher Dzigar Rinpoche, reminds us,

A fresh attitude starts to happen when we look to see that yesterday was yesterday, and now it is gone; today is today and now it is new. It is like that – every hour, every minute is changing. If we stop observing change, then we stop seeing everything as new.

Spiritual strength is something many of us are seeking and knowing when to let go is one of the benefits of dedicating yourself to a spiritual practice.

Chodron reminds us,

...It takes some training to equate complete letting go with comfort. But in fact, 'nothing to hold on to' is the root of happiness. There's a sense of freedom when we accept that we're not in control. Pointing ourselves toward what we would most like to avoid makes our barriers and shields permeable...

We are told about the pain of chasing after pleasure and the futility of running from pain. We hear also about the joy of awakening, of realizing our interconnectedness, of trusting the openness of our hearts and minds. But we aren't told all that much about the state of being in-between, (where we are...) no longer able to get our old comfort from the outside, but not yet dwelling in the continual sense of equanimity and warmth.

Being in-between is the kind of place we usually want to avoid. The challenge is to stay in the middle rather than buy into struggle and complaint. The challenge is to let it soften us rather than make us more rigid and afraid. Becoming intimate with the queasy feeling of being in the middle of nowhere only makes our hearts more tender. When we are brave enough to stay in the middle, compassion arises spontaneously.

By not knowing, not hoping to know, and not acting like we know what's happening, we begin to access our inner strength.

(Dwelling in the in-between place) requires learning to contain the paradox of something's being both right and wrong, of someone's being strong and loving and also angry, uptight and stingy. In that painful moment when we don't live up to our own standards, do we condemn ourselves or try to appreciate the paradox of being human? Can we forgive ourselves and stay in touch with our good and tender heart?

When someone pushes our button, do we set out to make the person wrong? Or do we repress our reaction with “I’m supposed to be loving. How could I hold this negative thought?” (A Buddhist spiritual practice) teaches us to stay with the uneasiness and not solidify into a view. We can meditate ... or simply look at the open sky – anything that encourages us to stay on the brink ...

When we stand at the crossroads not knowing which way to go ... we are at an important place where our solid views being to dissolve. ... it is the in-between state where the spiritually-mature person can let go.... (and we are able to) discover that we are big enough to hold something that is neither lie nor truth, neither pure nor impure, neither bad nor good.... We become aware that spending time in the middle... is a fruitful place to be... Resting here completely, steadfastly experiencing the clarity of the present moment is called enlightenment.

Because every person is born into their humanness, and along with our humanness is our ability to heal ourselves – achieve the free flow of love and compassion that comes from the enlightened completely open heart – a state of being that is worthy of all our faith and trust. May it be so.