

TRAIN YOUR BRAIN #9
LETTING GO
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Introduction

Our topic is letting go, one of the five essential inner skills – the others being awareness, insight, taking in the good, and using the will. (For background, please see the Five Essential Skills articles here: www.wisebrain.org/articles.html.)

We use letting go whenever we relax, get stress relief, release painful feelings like worry or anger, take things less personally, or drop thoughts that make us and others unhappy (like self-criticism or illogical fears).

Letting go is an action of the mind – just like letting go of a tissue into a trash can is an action of the hand.

It is completely natural. For example, in terms of the body, you let go every time you exhale or use the bathroom.

Fundamentally, letting go is the opposite of the clinging that leads to suffering. And thus very in line with mindfulness and meditation.

A Word about Experiential Exercises

This article will have some experiential exercises. As we've said before, when we do any experiential activities, feel free to opt out of them if you feel overloaded or uncomfortable. This is a class in inner skills, not therapy, and it is no substitute for professional care of body, mind, or spirit.

That said, sometimes exercises bring things up – especially if a person has had traumatic experiences in the past, or is currently in the middle of a difficult relationship.

Be kind to yourself first and foremost; as they say, "*First of all, do no harm.*" Feel free to skip an exercise, pull out of it once it starts, or deliberately take a fairly superficial and safe slice at it. And if anything comes up for you that is significantly difficult, we invite you to talk with us at the breaks, or contact us afterwards.

Also, please know that some of the exercises will suggest that you try to become aware of something, or do something, within your own mind. If you are unable to become aware of or do that something, that is alright. Maybe that is a sign to

yourself to be cautious and take your time with that particular material. Or a sign to investigate it further, on your own.

As a closing note, the Train Your Brain course values and includes contemplative activities. We hold these not in any context of religious advocacy, but as tools for personal well-being and development whose foundation in brain science is being increasingly established. And of the contemplative traditions, the one we are most familiar with is Buddhism, so we may speak in terms of it. But there is no attempt here to “convert” anyone to anything, and it is fine to relate to the material in the class however you like. As the Buddha himself said, see for yourself, always judging within your own independent mind what seems to be true and useful.

Saying Goodbye

To get into the topic of letting go, make a list of some of the things that you’d like to say goodbye to.

You can pick things that alas will stick around even if you say goodbye to them, like an annoying brother in law or a political leader you don’t care for. But you could get the most value by listing things that you can actually let go of, like tension in your back or excess fretting or having one glass of wine too many.

Alright, now take a look at your list, and see if there is anything on there that you do not actually want to let go of.

For example, look at each item and imagine that some powerful force like the Fairy Godmother or the cosmic vacuum cleaner or God or whatever could make that item go away – and then ask yourself if you would like that to happen. If the answer is yes, move onto the next item, and if the answer is no, cross the item off of your list.

Now, if you like, you can tear up your list and truly let go of everything on it! If you like, say good bye in your mind as many times as you want to everything on your list as you do this.

Really try to experience a genuine release or casting off of what you are releasing. You could say goodbye again in your mind as you toss your pieces into the trash.

Letting Go vs. Aversion

Really try to experience a genuine release or casting off of what you are releasing. You could say good bye again in your mind as you toss your pieces into the trash.

How was this for you? What did you experience while doing it? What have you realized or learned?

As we think about letting go of things, it is natural to consider the element of aversion, which means disliking, resisting, hating, or fearing something.

We often have an aversive reaction to whatever we want to let go of. But as we will see in a moment, there are a lot of problems with having aversive reactions to things. So let's consider where aversion comes from, its costs, and how to let go without aversion.

In the brain, aversion is the result of deep, evolution-driven brain structures that kept our ancestors alive and enabled them to pass along their genes. For example, a kind of epitome of aversion – vomiting – is controlled by circuits deep in the most primitive part of your brain: the medulla, in the brain stem, sometimes called “the insect brain” because it's so ancient.

As a quick and simplified summary – and please look to our website, WiseBrain.org for more on this subject– information is continually streaming into your brain from the world, and being generated within your brain by internal processes of thinking, feeling, imagining, wanting, remembering etc.

That information is being continually evaluated by different regions and circuits within your brain in terms of three fundamental dimensions: helpful to survival, harmful to survival, irrelevant to survival. By “survival,” we mean both life and death stuff and intermediate proxies, such as hunger and satiation, pleasure and pain, anxiety and confidence, frustration and satisfaction, etc.

If it is helpful, it could be registered with a pleasant feeling tone. If it's harmful, there's usually an unpleasant feeling tone. And if it's irrelevant, the feeling tone is neutral.

This feeling tone is generated mainly by a part of your brain called the **amygdala** – there are two of them, actually, little almond-shaped nodes in the center of your brain resting on top of the brain stem.

Interestingly, in Buddhism, the feeling tone is considered to be so central to human experience that it is one of the Five Aggregates of existence, which together comprise physical reality and our experience of it. As such, the feeling tone is supposed to be one of the four main objects of meditative awareness (called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness).

The feeling tone is so important because it is our reactions to it – reactions of grasping after the pleasant, aversion to the unpleasant, and over-looking or delusion about the neutral – that lead us first to crave, then to cling, and then to suffer.

This matter of the feeling tone and our reactions to it is one of those areas where there is a deep and mutually illuminating intersection between modern neuroscience and ancient contemplative wisdom. Fascinating to think about, and very useful to practice with.

To continue with the neurological theme, because survival programming in the brains of animals, including humans, is more a matter of avoiding the bad than enjoying the good, these evaluating regions and circuits are genetically primed to perceive and react to negative information, which then trains them further to perceive and react to negative information.

For example, the amygdala is pre-programmed to respond to facial expressions of fear or disgust in others, two key signals of threats to our own survival offered by other animals in our troupe, our tribe, or on our television sets.

By the way, this inherent “negativity bias” in your brain is why it is so important to deliberately intensify and savor and “take in the good” of positive experiences. That’s how you compensate for the brain’s natural tendency to hold onto and showcase negative experiences and to let positive ones glide right by. For more information on that, please look at the materials and listen to the audio from the last TYB class, which are on our website.

So Mother Nature gave us aversive reactions to help us survive and have grandchildren. But as we have said before, she does not care if we suffer.

Aversion causes us to suffer in many ways:

- In itself it is an unpleasant experience. As a sidebar, it’s worth noting that its unpleasant qualities can lead a person to become averse to aversion. You see this in what are called “counter-phobic” reactions, or in certain fundamental life strategies, such as the 7 in the system of personality types called the Enneagram.
- It activates the “fight-or-flight” sympathetic nervous system, sending a cascade of stress hormones throughout your body and pulling resources away from long-term projects like digestion or maintaining a strong immune system. As we all know, chronic stress reactions have serious long-term consequences for both mental and physical health. For example, chronic aversion in the form of hostility is a major risk factor for heart disease.

- Aversion often triggers the expression of negative emotions which have harmful effects on others and thus on oneself.
- It often leads us to act in impulsive, harsh, and exaggerated ways that harm ourselves and others.
- In a deep way, aversion divides us from the world by setting us against it or apart from it. This creates a painful inherent tension between “I” and world and adds to the sense of self which is itself a source of suffering.

In contrast to aversion, letting go in the sense we mean it here does not include aversion – though some may be arising in the mind at the same time, which is often the case this side of enlightenment!

Letting go without aversion means, primarily:

- Simply setting down and walking away. Releasing. Abandoning. Saying goodbye without anger. Exhaling. Taking out the garbage. Renouncing. Turning away from the bad.
- Turning toward the good. Planting flowers. Moving on.

More broadly, healthy letting go could also mean:

- Not attaching in the first place. Not taking the other person’s problem as your own. Not presuming that you are implicated. Setting a boundary between you and it.
- Firmly – though without aversion – pushing away, cutting off, or refusing that which is unwholesome.

Letting go does not mean being lackadaisical, irresponsible, or uncaring. You can care deeply about important things, and be inspired and motivated by heartfelt aspirations, without holding onto the results of your wise efforts.

In your brain, letting go is associated with three major regions or systems. Understanding these structurally gives a concrete clarity to the three main aspects of letting go – choosing, releasing/relaxing, and staying with it:

- The **prefrontal cortex**, located behind your forehead, and especially behind your eyes, both decides what to let go of and sends signals to the emotion circuits of your brain to settle down and move on. It initiates and sustains your resolve – or

what some might call Right or Wise Intention. This region does the “choosing” part of letting go.

- When the letting go cascade begins, the **parasympathetic** nervous system activates, fostering relaxation and contentment throughout your body, and dampening down the sympathetic nervous system. This is the releasing/relaxing part.
- The **anterior cingulate cortex** – one in each hemisphere (like the amygdala), shaped like a finger, close to the center of your head – monitors how well you are staying on your goal of letting go, and sends out a warning signal if you start holding on instead. This region handles the staying with it part of letting go.

So, when you let go, these parts of your brain are good friends, on your side. And it's OK to make a little bow to them.

Physically Letting Go

Like any of the inner exercises we do, it's alright to experience whatever you get. And if it ever gets uncomfortable, pull out of it and shift your attention elsewhere. It's also OK to ignore my suggestions, and go with what feels most valuable for you.

OK, relax, eyes open or closed.

Focus on breathing, especially the sensations of breathing from inside your body . . . Like the cool air going down your throat and warm air coming out . . . Like the sense of your lungs expanding and contracting, especially the inside of your chest.

The breathing ongoing, the other contents of awareness just flowing on through. Without grasping after them or aversion toward them.

Now, particularly notice exhaling.

Use the exhaling to sense or imagine things leaving you. Like bodily tension. Or unpleasant feelings, such as underlying anxiety . . . or irritation. Or unwanted busy thinking, planning.

If you like, use the exhaling to let go of some or all of the things on your list.

Now, see if you can get a sense of your whole body as you breathe. The whole body breathing.

That sense of the whole body could draw you into a spacious feeling that is very peaceful. It may come and go, which is fine. Just invite it back if it does.

Now, see if you can relax any sense of top-down control of your breathing. Allow your body to control entirely your breath, just like it would if you were sleeping. Your breath may naturally slow to the minimum necessary.

You are letting go to the body. Exploring and noticing the complete abandonment of any holding onto the breath. Completely letting go of control. Being the body breathing.

In this place of letting go, notice what is continuing.

Breathing continues. Awareness. The universe keeps on going. Your heart keeps beating. You keep coming back even when you keep letting go.

You can let go of the fear of letting go . . .

Now, as you continue to let go as much as possible any control over the breath, letting it do what needs to do on its own, you might like to add a sense of accepting everything as it is . . . letting go of any effort or struggle with all that is . . . simply a body breathing . . . aware . . . accepting . . .

Alright, when you like, bring the exercise to a close.

What did you experience during the exercise? What did you learn or realize?

A key point to remember: No control breathing gives the sense of a deep letting go

By the way, you might be interested to know that when you were paying attention to the internal sensations of your body, and also when you were getting an awareness of your body as a whole, you were lighting up your **insula**.

This part of the brain is near the anterior cingulate cortex we discussed earlier, and like the ACC, there are two of them inside your head, finger shaped, and near the center, so they are closely connected with the sensory, emotional, and executive regions of the brain.

The insula is especially involved in what is called interoception, which means the sensing of the internal states of the body. Interestingly, since the sensing of our internal states is a key element of empathy, the more aware that a person is of her

internal states, the more empathic she tends to be. The insula lights up when we are being empathic.

So if you want to be more empathic – or if your friends and family and kids and co-workers and spouse would like you to be more empathic! – a good way to do that is by paying more attention to your internal states. In fact, the more you do that – such as in yoga or meditation – the thicker the neuronal connections get within your insula.

In effect, among their other benefits, activities such as these help people become more empathic.

Being Your Best Self

Before we move on, I'd like to mention that there are many, many ways to let go of problematic thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and desires. A whole list of techniques is summarized in the handout. Check it out, and try the methods that work for you.

As you have probably noticed, letting go of one thing means embracing another, even if it is only the space that is left when the other thing moves on.

In fact, having that positive thing to join with often helps give us the comfort, the courage, to separate from that which we let go.

For example, bringing to mind the feelings you get from people who like or love you can make it easier to say goodbye to a person who is not good for you.

Or, to use a traditional example, in Hindu culture, individuals who are celibate – they have let go of that part of their lives – are said to be “Brahmacharya” which means joined with Brahma, a manifestation of God.

In a sense, it is out of our joining with the wholesome that the abandonment of the unwholesome naturally occurs.

Exercise

So, let's explore this in concrete terms.

Get out your pad and pen, and this time take a moment to reflect on one or important things that you want to let go of – and for each one, try to identify one or more things that you could join with instead.

To make explicit some of the major themes that may have come up for some people, you could let go of:

- Painful feelings
- Resisting facts you don't like but which can't be changed. Here, it can be especially helpful to think in terms of healthy surrender, of healthy giving up, as in: I give up about the planet warming, even though I will do what I can about that . . . I give up about the 49'ers losing record . . . I surrender to being 54 . . . I surrender to having been put up for adoption as a child . . .
- Desires that lead to suffering
- Approaches, styles, plans, strategies, etc. that just aren't working
- Holding onto things staying the same that are inevitably changing

So take a couple of minutes for writing both important things you want to let go of and their wholesome alternatives.

Now, inside your own mind, go back over each thing you are letting go of and take a moment to feel yourself joining with its wholesome alternatives. Get a sense of each of those wholesome alternatives being alive in your life. A sense of them as already existing fully for you . . . Noticing what that would be like . . . How that would be good for you and others . . .

Now, inside your own mind, for each thing you are letting go of, take a few seconds or longer to ask yourself: "Is this me?" Am I this anger? Am I this craving for a cigarette? Am I this longing for love? Am I this worry about our son? Is that worry me?

A major way we hold on, and do not let go, is through *identifying* with things. My viewpoint. My job. My car's position in the highway. My feeling, my thought, my desire . . .

Instead, inquire: Is this thought me? Is that goal me? Am I our son's Bar Mitzvah speech?

There is no right answer here. Just explore and see what comes up for you, and keep turning toward and engaging that which helps you let go.

It might help you to call up again the bodily feeling that you experienced earlier tonight, of breathing with no effort, breathing as the whole body, as you consider: Am I that? Is that me?

In the space created by all that you have let go of, including making things “me” and “mine,” take a moment to open up to whatever profoundly wholesome influences you like.

Such as love . . . or integrity . . . or God . . . or Buddha nature . . . or pure awareness . . .
Give yourself over to the wholesome, be devoted to the wholesome, and let go of everything else.

Rest here for a few minutes, returning to the wholesome, abiding in the wholesome and letting go of everything else

How was that for you? What did you experience? What can you take away? What can you learn?

Some key points related to this exercise:

- Turning to the wholesome rather than struggling with the unwholesome. Just don't pick it up any more. Focus on planting flowers rather than pulling weeds.
- The deep, natural bodily sense of being that clings to nothing . . . our resting state, our true nature
- Not claiming the unwholesome as “I” or “mine”

Conclusion

This month, we suggest you keep focusing on letting go. If you like, you could use a regular event, like the ringing of the phone, or walking through a door, or whenever you notice that the hour has changed, to let go deeply, for example, exhaling fully.

In closing, as a great teacher, Ajahn Chah said: “If you let go a little, you will have a little happiness. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of happiness. And if you let go completely, you will be completely happy.”