

Session 3. The Power of Letting Go

When we hear the words *letting go*, we think of losing something. Letting go usually means a person has given up and now someone else is taking control. In this practice, letting go does mean giving up, but it is a way of giving up your tensions so that *you* can be in control of your own reactions again.

How Do Tensions Develop?

Feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that we repeat again and again become deeply ingrained patterns. The more we repeat these patterns, the more it seems that we can't get away from them. Our patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting start to define who we are and how we see the world. Our tensions are like ruts in a road. Once we have driven over the same ground again and again, we have formed deep ruts. Then it's hard to drive any place else on the road because we are stuck in the ruts. The Letting Go practice helps us to release our habitual patterns so we are free to choose other ways to think, feel, and act. It is like filling in the ruts in the road so we are free to drive in new places. The more you meditate and practice Letting Go, the more you fill in these ruts in the road. You gradually become freer to choose new ways of feeling, thinking, and acting. Old patterns don't always go away in one day, but with practice we can let go of them.

How to Do the "Letting Go" Practice

What do we give up when we let go? Only the tensions we are holding inside. Here's how you can do the Letting Go practice: Watch your breathing. If you experience any tension, take a breath. You can picture your breath going right to the tension or feeling inside and blowing up a balloon that is bigger than the tension. The flow of your breath breaks up the tension. Inside the balloon is a feeling of relaxation and peacefulness that becomes bigger than any tension that may be there. Let all the tension flow out with the next exhalation. Inside, the feeling of relaxation becomes larger.

Letting Go Is *Not* Stuffing Your Feelings

Letting go does *not* mean pushing away your feelings or "stuffing" your reactions to people or situations. As feelings or thoughts that are stressful come up, you can simply take a deep breath into them and let them go. As stressful thoughts and feelings arise, we still experience them, but don't let them take hold of us and linger longer than they need to.

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Session 3 (continued)

By practicing Letting Go throughout the day and during your seated practice, you quickly learn to let go of tensions as they arise. You become freer of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that may be strong habits. Letting Go opens up more choices for how you will react to things and what you will do. For example, John was a person who believed it was wrong for someone to change lanes in front of him when he was driving down the highway. Because of this deeply held belief, he became angry when someone changed lanes in front of him and felt justified if he flew into a rage and even made rude gestures at the other driver. Because John lived in a place where there was a lot of traffic, he was usually quite exhausted by the time he arrived at work in the morning. John decided to practice Hum Sah on his way to work to reduce the tension he felt on the road. When other drivers cut him off, he worked to let go of his anger and expand the relaxed and happy feeling he got from the Hum Sah practice. As a result, John could still become irritated by traffic, but now driving to work was more of a pleasure. John's tendency to get irritated by other drivers was not erased in a day or even a week, because it was a strong habit. However, John's regular practice of Hum Sah and Letting Go and his commitment to developing himself offered great benefits to John because he was able to focus on the happiness that was inside him, rather than spending his time on unproductive habits.

So, in this practice, letting go *is* a way of giving up, but you are only giving up the habit of holding on to anger, frustration, and fear. When we let go, we are looking for that place of relaxation on the inside. It is always there when you look for it.

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Letting Go and PTSD

People with PTSD are bothered by reminders of their traumatic events. These reminders or trauma triggers can cause intense distress. People quickly learn to avoid trauma triggers in hopes they can avoid the suffering that goes with being reminded of the trauma. Unfortunately, avoidance often prolongs our suffering, because we are not able to resolve the trauma and put it in the past.

Letting Go and Avoidance

The Letting Go practice is an alternative to avoidance. When we are practicing Letting Go, we are simply paying attention to the present moment, noticing what is happening, and letting go of thoughts, feelings, and tensions as they arise, rather than trying to push them away or think about them more. This practice can be challenging for people with PTSD, because when distressing thoughts and feelings come up, the urge to avoid these thoughts and feelings may be strong. With Letting Go, when a trauma reminder makes us extremely upset, we then take a deep breath into the tension and feelings inside, as we exhale, we actively release the distress.

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With Letting Go, we know that as painful as some of our experiences may be, they will pass. As we practice Letting Go, we will get better and better at staying in the “here and now,” rather than ruminating about what happened in the past.

Identifying Trauma Triggers

The more attention we pay to the present moment, the more we may notice things that trigger our distress. This knowledge is powerful because when we know what triggers our distress, we can actively work to notice our reactions to the trigger and simply let go of them, rather than letting them take us by surprise. When trauma triggers have bothered us for a long time, they do not always go away completely the first or second time we let go of them. By practicing Letting Go over time, trauma triggers will no longer cause distress. Practicing Letting Go in your daily life is like going to the gym and working out every day. At the gym, your body becomes stronger each time, but it takes work to achieve that strength. Letting Go is also hard work, and every time we let go, we get stronger.

FAQs for Session 3

Does Letting Go mean I can never get angry with anyone again? This would be a problem for me because some people will just take advantage of me if I'm too quiet.

Letting Go doesn't mean you become a doormat. Letting Go is a bit like unhooking all the habits and tensions that are attached to you so that situations and people can't “yank your chain” or trigger you in that way anymore. If you face situations with a deep sense of letting go, you'll be able to use your anger skillfully in the situation, rather than having it use you. Here's how to use your practice to deal with anger: When we get angry, all of our attention wants to flow out of us toward the other person. Instead of exploding with anger, we can first take a breath right into the place where the anger is and then let go of it. If we can do this practice even for one instant, we may be able to respond much differently to the situation. There is a universe of possibilities in the space of one breath. If you give yourself a moment to take a breath and let go, you may find that you are able to react in new ways to situations.

Does Letting Go mean that I should look for tension or focus on it in some way?

No, the focus of meditation is not on tension, but on finding and expanding that sense of relaxation, peacefulness, and happiness that is inside you. It's a bit like steering a large boat. As boat pilots know, if you want to steer a boat through a channel, you do best to look ahead at the goal, rather than at the channel markers. If you focus on the channel markers, you may steer into them. If you focus ahead on the goal, you'll sail right past them. Those tensions that arise in meditation are like channel markers: Let go of them and sail right past them to the goal.

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What if I don't feel any tension when I am meditating? How do I let go?

Although the Letting Go practice is helpful when one is experiencing strong emotions or thoughts, it can also be used if you are not feeling any particular tension. You can let go of distracting thoughts that arise while you are meditating. You can let go of your curiosity about how long you've been meditating, rather than checking the clock. You can let go of those feelings of hunger or that sensation of muscle pain in your back. You can let go of the feeling of happiness that arises and watch for what will come next. In sum, let go of anything and everything that come up in meditation.

I'm not sure if I'm letting go or not. Is there something I can try to give me an experience of letting go?

Try this practice to get started: Focus your breathing in your heart area, right in the center of your chest. Don't do anything to change your breathing at first, but just watch the breath as it flows into your heart area and flows out again. You can picture that your breath is going right to the heart and blowing up like a balloon that becomes bigger with each breath. Inside the balloon is a feeling of relaxation and peacefulness. Then, as you exhale, simply let go of any tension or holding. Inside, the feeling of relaxation becomes larger.

Session 3 Practice

Tasks for the Next Week

This week, you can make a concerted effort to bring your practice into your daily life to cope with the issues that matter to you. You may wish to consider ahead of time what issues you want to try to address with your daily life practice. You can continue your efforts to set up a regular daily sitting practice that works for you, knowing that most people's practice develops over time, with more minutes devoted to it each week.

Practice in Daily Life

Watch your breathing throughout the day. Make a special effort to use the Letting Go practice with any tension that comes up. You can do this by taking a deep breath and, as you exhale, simply let go of any tension or holding. See how many times you can let go this week. Notice what happens when you let go. How do you feel? Does it change the choices you make?

Be sure to use the Letting Go practice when you really need it, such as when things aren't going well. These techniques can be helpful in dealing with strong negative emotions, for instance, anger, fear, frustration, and sadness.

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Sitting Practice

Listen to Track 2, “Complete Breath,” at least 6 days this week, for 30 minutes a day.

Daily Practice Log

Write down the number of minutes you have spent each day on each practice. You will most likely not do all the listed practices every week. You can continue to record reflections about your use of the practices.

● Session 3 Journal ●

Have you tried Letting Go during your daily life? What was the situation, and what happened when you let go?

What situations in your life might be improved by using this practice more frequently when you are in that situation?

What was it like to watch your breathing during the day? Did it change your reactions to situations?

Debriefing the Practice: Did you try the Letting Go practice during your Sitting Practice? How did it go?

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