

## Reflecting on Letting Go

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Recently a member of the sangha told a story of her fifteen-year struggle with her husband. Always before company came over she expected that he would help with the many preparations, and always he didn't, so always she was angry and disappointed. One day as she was preparing for company and at the same time preparing her anger and disappointment with her husband, she had the insight that she could do something different. At that moment she let go of any expectation of help from her husband, and with energy and vigor she stepped into the reality of the situation. She felt enormous relief and deep inner freedom.

Sometimes we like the words "letting go." Just saying them can bring a sense of relief. Lately I have been reflecting on their meaning. Some years back I was having difficulty in a relationship, and I asked a Zen teacher for advice. After a lot of talk about the many facets of the situation, he finally said, "You need to let go of something." He didn't say what, but it was clear that if the situation were to change, something needed to be let go. After pondering what that could be, I awoke one morning with the clear thought that what I needed to let go of was hope. At that moment a joy arose, and I felt fresh air begin to circulate in my psyche. I settled in with the way things were, and this allowed me to be clearer about the opportunities available in the present moment, and the direction of the next step.

When I later thought about what had happened, I realized that I hadn't actually let go of hope, but I had let go of clinging to hope—of being dependent on it, being held down by it. Katagiri Roshi used to use the expression, Keep it warm in your heart. Looking deeply, I can see that letting go of something—for instance, hope—just means that we stop carrying around the banner of hope that flaps and waves and blocks our view when any wind blows. Rather, hope is kept warm in our heart as nourishment for the great bodhisattva aspiration to open our hearts and our arms to the suffering of the many beings.

Sometimes we don't like the words "letting go"; they bring up anxiety. Part of the anxiety we may experience when contemplating letting go is that we feel we will be left with nothing—that our situation will be "hopeless." In actuality, when we let go we are left with everything—the total dynamic working of the universe. It is our clinging that prevents us from feeling part of this dynamic working, that seems to separate us from the freely functioning universe. We say, "I feel so alone, so cut off," but we create that delusion through our clinging.

So actually, letting go involves letting go of an object, but also, simultaneously, an opening of the heart that is often so defended and clenched. When we give up our clinging, the heart opens to accept whatever it is that we have been resisting. Eventually the heart becomes very wide, and "let it go" becomes "let it be." This does not mean passive resignation but rather a vital engagement with the way things actually are. In reality we can't really let go of anything—all the myriad things are there, coming and going in the waves of the great compassionate ocean. We just let them be, stop our resistance and clinging, and enjoy swimming freely.