

## **Letting Go Discussion – Ch. 5**

**June 19, 2009**

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Welcome everyone. Tonight is the fifth chapter discussion from the book *Letting Go*, entitled “The Five Stages of Training.” As most of you have been here for each of the first four discussion groups, you know that those four chapters are introducing us to why it is that we practice and what the nature of that practice is. So this is why, for the fifth chapter, I decided to address the actual stages of training, so that we would have an opportunity to have a bit of an overview. This way we can see where we are in our own practice.

Please let me read and excerpt or two from the chapter.

*“Only One Process*

*We often read in various texts about different breakdowns of the stages of training. There are infinite ways that these stages of practice, sometimes called personal development, can be divided up and defined. You can declare as many stages as you like, depending on how you like to express it, and how elaborate the particular cosmology of your school happens to be. But the process of practice itself will always be fundamentally the same, no matter what school we find ourselves in, as long as it is an authentic practice. In some schools you may find extensive explanatory material, and in others the explanations of these stages can be extremely sparse and simple. But we are always describing the same process, as there is only one. No matter how elaborate the religious imagery, finally we only have this moment right here, right now to work with. And what is not here is not there. I like to use five stages, so I will keep it simple tonight, though I will mention a sixth. Prior to engaging in any type of practice, there is a kind of pre-practice stage, which doesn't really count as a stage. This is the state of the majority of mankind throughout their many lifetimes before they finally reach this first stage. This pre-practice condition is characterized by a predominant non-awareness of the evolutionary relationship between our own actions and ensuing experiences. The wonderful thing about the way we practice in Aikido is that you and your external partner are a perfect example of what happens within yourself when you live your daily life. In Ki-Aikido, when you are with your partner, if you are distracted, frightened, overwhelmed, or intimidated by the attack, you see right away that you cannot function well. You lose your One Point, your heart comes up in your throat, and you become paralyzed (or at least very clumsy). This is exactly what it is like inside of you when you are afraid of the things that life is bringing you, or even slightly disappointed in them. Even when you are looking forward to something exciting, you are still not able to focus properly, you are not calm, and you are not able to deal with life as it is coming to you,*

*because you are not present. In Ki-Aikido, as our training unfolds, it shows us what stage we are actually in, by and through our partner. That's why we are always insisting that the person attacking not fake the attack. When we get to the highest level in Aikido technique, it is important to offer, and insist on receiving, a realistic attack. Otherwise, the person being attacked begins to have a notion of calmness when in fact that is not actually present. Then when something stressful in real life happens, that person will be suffering under a delusion. He may think that he is quite able to operate on a certain level, when he is not on that level at all.*

*It is always useful to remind ourselves of these stages, as it promotes a healthier and more inclusive understanding on all of our parts. If we can clarify the stages, this makes it easier for people to see their own level, and to therefore get at the work that is actually to be done. Remember that the pre-practice state is about trying to control your environment to give yourself good things and keep bad things away from you. This is the condition that everyone brings to the practice in the beginning. And that is precisely what we have to sacrifice. Of course, "sacrifice" implies that you are giving up something. But what you are giving up is not food or entertainment, except on the most shallow level. What you are being asked to give up, or sacrifice, is that self-centered endless self-judgment that is the contraction we call the small self. This small self says "don't eat meat", or "don't see violent movies", etc. This is shoga trying to control and perfect itself, and is missing the point entirely. In this work, we are being asked to give up that very effort to control our life, since that is the fundamental misunderstanding itself."*

In this chapter I mention the four necessities of practice. Do you remember? The first one is to be present in the moment. The second one is to be open to whatever it is that is arising in this moment. The third one is to see this moment for what it actually is. And the fourth one is to accept it without prejudice or preference.

Of course, in order to be present, we have to have awareness. It's not just being present. Everyone here is present. I mean your body is present. But are you present with full awareness? In other words are you not leaving anything out that is coming to you? And if you are leaving something out, what is it that's causing you to miss that?

I can't see everything that is happening to you, and you can't see everything that is happening in me. You can't see my experience and visa versa. But I am guessing that you can see the same number of people, you can see me, you can hear the cars going by, you can hear what's happening in the tennis court down there, his chair is squeaking, and the hum of the fans is going on, we can see the light in the room, this dojo has a certain smell, and so forth. That's about all I can assume. I do know that you are feeling some

particular way in your body. You can experience that right now for yourself. Can you be aware of how your body is feeling? Are you feeling settled and calm and patient and intimate with yourself...vulnerable and open?

As we start to really be present in awareness, automatically we move to the next stage of being open. Being open means being vulnerable to the experiences we are having. Most of our daily lives are filled, both externally and internally, with lots of noises, lots of busyness, a lot of challenges and difficulty, and we often want to get away and be alone because we really are all longing to be one with our selves. We long to be completely at peace and still, to be at ease and relaxed and enjoy our true nature completely. This is openness. And yet, when we do go off on our own, or even in our meditation room, we find that inside our lives are still very busy, with lots of thoughts going on, lots of struggle, lots of ideas, preferences, prejudices, and judgments about things. This is very difficult.

So we need to see. That's the next stage. We need to look at what's actually going on with us, not what we think we should be doing in meditation, or what we should be doing when we are sitting talking to a friend, what our relationship ought to be, how they ought to see me, how I ought to feel about them. But what actually is happening? If we have awareness and we are present and we are open to what's happening, then we get to see what's actually going on with us. We might not like it, but we don't have to correct it. We don't have to change that. We just have to see it with awareness. If we are caught up in something, that means we are not having awareness, we're not seeing it, and we're not open to it. This is true whether it's an emotion or just an idea about how we think something should be going down. All we have to be is just aware. You may be in the middle of anger, or envy, or greed, or confusion, but if you have awareness that you are experiencing that, that's enough. Awareness is peace. It is already stillness itself. We don't have to make any changes to get to the stillness, because it is always already here.

Then the final step there is to accept whatever we discover, because that is what is, not something else. I think I said earlier, we accept this without preference or prejudice, meaning we have to accept whatever is happening without any kind of value or moral judgment about it. Whatever it is, is what it is. If you say you accept it, but with prejudice, then you might be accepting it with a kind of resignation. Like, "Well, I can live with how fat I am. I don't like it, but I accept it. I'll live with it, because I can't seem to change it." So that's not accepting it. That's more like hating yourself about being fat, but resigning yourself to what seems to be the inevitable. And then, accepting, but with preference, would be, "I was really nice to that guy, I was very good, and several people spoke to me about how effective I was and what a good friend to him. I really like

this state and I think I'll hang on to it as long as I can." With preference, you really want to hang onto that feeling about yourself. So this is seeing things as they are, maybe, but it's not accepting how things are, in a neutral way. With everything that comes along, we either want to get rid of it or we want to hang on to it. So accepting means just that, accepting without any of that kind of judgment. Of course you need judgment to see what's happening to begin with, but you are free to use that judgment neutrally.

So these are the four necessities of training. Throughout all of the five stages of training, these four necessities are what we are engaged in. In other words, in order to take on this practice at all, you have to introduce yourself to those four necessities. So as we're discussing this, and as you are reading the chapter and thinking about this, and as you go on in the book, don't leave those four necessities behind. They are the very nature of your practice. They are the essence of all practice.

It was mentioned to me that this is a very long chapter, whereas I think the next chapter is only three or four pages. That means that there is an awful lot of material here. I said in the last discussion on Chapter 4, (which also is quite a large chapter with a lot of material), that you might not see how some of the subsections relate to the overall chapter subject. And you might notice in this Chapter 5 there is quite a long question and answer period at the end of it, and often the person who is asking the question may not seem to be relating that question to that chapter. But my answer always does relate it, so that's why I left it in there, so that you could see that. So as we ask questions tonight, I hope that they will come out of the material that's in this chapter. It ought to be pretty easy to do because it's so huge, probably the most important chapter in the book.

So, please go ahead.

*Student: You mentioned about moving up a stage and then sometimes going backwards. As I was preparing for my last test, I was injured, and so couldn't prepare in the way that I had wanted to. As a result, I didn't feel ready, and yet there was nothing for me to do about it, because of my injury. So then when I stepped out to take the test, I just let all that worry go and it went very well, in fact better than ever before. I really felt at one with everyone in the room and with my uke. It felt very good. But then as soon as I came back to train the next week after that, that freedom was gone. All the self-criticism was back again in full force. I thought I had lost it and then here it was back again. Is that an example of what you are talking about in this chapter?*

I think that's exactly what we are talking about. That's a very good example of it, and I think everyone can identify with it. Don't we all have that experience again and again?

Of course, none of this is a direct path, like a jet plane taking off. In your case you had all that difficulty and all that doubt that you had to overcome, not only physical difficulty but doubts about your ability to perform because you hadn't been able to practice as much, and so there you were and you thought you were in deep trouble, so you just really had to let all of those things go, because you saw that you couldn't do anything about them. So in letting them go you were suddenly and completely open and had a brand new kind of experience. It is important to point out that there was no way you could have imagined the possibility of the this new kind of experience when you were troubled by the negative.

And then the next week you said you returned to some previous condition of self-judgment. One of the points in the chapter is that this will happen to all of us. But as I was just saying in the introduction here, awareness is the key. When you are aware of that difficult state of mind, then don't try to change anything to bring back some previous state that you remember, that was so cool. That's not how that more free state of mind happened to begin with. You didn't bring that from some other place. Right? So just be aware of what's going on and accept it. Don't try to change it. Don't judge yourself. We're always in varying states of dis-ease, sometimes for many reasons we might not even be aware of, let alone be able to control. All kinds of stuff is coming up all the time, so we have all sorts of challenges.

So this is a good example and the key is always just be aware and don't try to change anything. Accept it as it is. That's you. Of course, inquiring into that is important. "What is it that makes me like that?" You might not have the opportunity to actually inquire when you are on the mat. But be aware of it, experience it, see what it really feels like to be like that, don't try to change it, and don't be criticizing yourself about it, and then when you have time to sit down you can inquire into that. You can bring it up again. You know the feeling. "What makes me like this? What makes me do this to myself? Is this support? Is this kindness? Is this love? Is this gentleness? Or is this doing myself a kind of violence, a kind of self-hatred? And if so, why would I divide myself up in parts and one part hate another part? Isn't training oneness?" This is being in inquiry. The experience of our true nature is not a cold-hearted kind of oneness. It's an open hearted, loving, kind, generous, compassionate oneness. Like you would be with your child. You wouldn't treat your child the way you treat yourself. Right?

*Student: Right.*

*Student: When you talk about greed...I'm at a point in my life when I want more for myself, and I have goals to that end. So is that being greedy? I mean you do want to set*

*goals for yourself, and I am just wondering how that relates to being greedy. Should I be letting go of wanting more for myself? I just have a little bit of a struggle with that. When I was reading the chapter, thinking about it, I was wondering how do I let go of wanting more for myself?*

I think most everyone here has the same tendency toward wanting to gather more, to be more. Why do you want to be more?

*Student: I don't know. Maybe just to be better, and not suffer, and you know I just want to be proud of myself, and I have had these goals my whole life, to accomplish these things. I feel like if I just stop going to school and not complete that, then I would fulfill these expectations I have for myself.*

How do you feel about those expectations?

*Student: Good, I mean I want to do those things and I want to learn and I think it will benefit me in the future and that's why I want to do it. But that's kind of greedy.*

And when something gets in the way of you doing that, how do you feel then?

*Student: Frustrated.*

What if you found yourself doing something else entirely, not having anything to do with any of your goals or your plans?

*Student: I'd probably just go with this, cause actually this is kind of happening to me right now. I mean the direction I'm going in is not really what I am studying in school at all, and I keep thinking, "Well, maybe this is what I am supposed to doing."*

You seem to have a kind of split personality there. You have an ordered requirement, a curriculum. You have a life curriculum for yourself and you expect certain results from that. And I would guess that you've gathered that not just from out of your own head, but from other people, maybe your parents, other teachers you've had in school, things you read and philosophies you've heard and so you've put together this curriculum that you have to fulfill. And that's fine, but stuff happens. You don't know what might come up. So in other words you have to just take it a step at a time.

It's nice to have a five-year plan, because then you know what direction you should be walking. If you want to go to New York, then that's good to know because when you

start walking you want to be walking in that direction. But as you go along, every day something else comes up, and you never know what that might be. If you are too attached to your goal of getting to New York, then you might not notice some great opportunity that comes along and is handed right to you, or you might even see it as a distraction from your goal. Right? You might reject it out of hand, thinking “My idea is to go to New York. I don’t have time for this.”

This is like the question you asked me during the Chapter 4 discussion about the difference between experiencing something and indulging in it. Of course it’s good to have plans. You are a young person. It’s good to put together a plan. If you want to be a doctor you have to attend so many years at this school and so many years at that one. Or if you want to be a lawyer then you have to follow some similar program. You’re training Aikido, so even here you need to come to the dojo and you have to go through these tests, etc. But if you get attached to the idea of getting your next belt, then you might get injured or something else happens to make it difficult for you, then you are in trouble. Training is always about seeing the whole picture. It doesn’t mean that you don’t have an idea of someplace that you are headed, but you are not indulging in it, you are not obsessed with it. You are present and open to whatever happens. And something may come along and take you in a whole new direction. And then you might or might not find yourself down at the end of many directions arriving in New York. You see, if you knew the best way to get to New York, what that actually means, you’d be in New York already. If you knew the best way to grow up and be a person that you can be proud of, you’d be that now. So let’s see what happens.

Those four necessities: being present, being open, seeing what is going on, and accepting that, that’s the practice. That’s what you do every day. And that will take you where it will take you. And it will always be a good place because guess what? You will be a genuine, real, honest, true person. You won’t be a frenetic needy person that’s obsessed with going after some goal. And that’s really what you want, because the only reason you have those nice goals is because you want to get in touch with that part of yourself that is true and be real to yourself and to those you know and love. Isn’t that true? That’s all any of us want. That’s all this is about. And it never comes from the outside. We can’t get it from education, money, the teacher, or through loved ones. You can’t get it from anybody on the outside. That’s why I always say, “The teacher had to practice. You have to practice too.” OK?

*Student: You write, “What you are being asked to give up or sacrifice is that self-centered endless self judgment that is the contraction we call the small self. This small*

*self says things like, “Don’t eat meat” or “Don’t see violent movies”, etc.” Could you explain that a little bit more?*

Basically, the small mind is always saying “Don’t do this, do that” and then you can be the person you can be proud of, as if it comes from the outside somewhere. “This is shoga trying to control and perfect itself and is missing the point entirely. In this work we are being asked to give up that very effort to control our life, which is the fundamental principle that we are practicing.” So that is the problem.

I am not saying here that you should eat meat or not, or that you should go to violent movies or not. Michael Pollan, the author of the book, *In Defense of Food*, says “eat food, not too much, mostly plants.” Very simple, and he is a kind of master of eating. The point here is that we tend to get obsessed with guiding our life, “you must live this way, you must not live that way.” This is trying to build an ideal person, physically, mentally, and emotionally, an Atman, if you will, a perfect being, right out of your own mind. And your mind, or your ideas and beliefs in this case, is made up of all this stuff you study and read and hear from other people. I have met a few deeply centered, genuine, and truly open human beings in my life. And they each had personal preferences that were completely different from each other, or from me. They weren’t all vegetarians. One was, but only one out of several. The Dalai Lama eats meat, and he’s one of those I refer to. A couple of them smoked tobacco, for instance. But some say, “Oh, you’re not supposed to smoke if you’re a spiritual person.” Some drank alcohol or had strange food habits. Look at Suzuki Sensei. He always said, “Any kind, whatever. I’m open to everything.” We’d say, “What kind of restaurant do you want to go to?” “I don’t care, take me to any kind. I eat anything. I drink anything.” He was just wide open and I think that’s a good lesson for us all.

I am trying to express here that we tend to try to micro-manage our lives, and when we are doing that we are not open to whatever is going on in the moment. We are judging and criticizing our selves and saying, “You should be this way, you should not be that way.” I mean, if you pick up an apple and take a bite and it’s rotten, just put it down. But don’t judge by saying “Who gave me that apple?” or “I’m so stupid I should have known!” No. “Oh, that one’s rotten. I won’t eat that.” I mean it’s just common sense, just regular living without any drama, without making ourselves special. If you think about all of that advice we give ourselves, this is all about building that special personality that is attractive to the people that we want to impress, so that we are never rejected. Above all, we don’t want to be rejected, so we will do whatever it takes not to be rejected, never mind if it’s the worse thing in the world for us particularly. You know, what’s good for one is not necessarily good for another. You’ve traveled a lot, so you

know that. What's good in one country is not good in another. And with just the few of us in this room, we have all different kinds of ideas.

I never tell you that you shouldn't do something. Go ahead, do it. Whatever you like. Whatever works for you. Everybody is working out their own salvation in that way. But we are very hard on ourselves, and as I was talking to Dave about earlier, we really should treat ourselves the way we would treat our children, with kindness and love and support and compassion and benevolence and openness. You don't want your child to burn his hand on the stove. But you don't say, "Oh, you stupid!" and make him fear it. Maybe you let him get really close and you say, "See, can you feel as you get closer it gets hotter? Don't touch that." Now he is just aware, and that's all he needs to be. All you are doing is just describing boundaries. There is no judgment involved. But we are not like that with ourselves. We are not so kind and gentle.

Does that help?

*Student: Yes.*

*Student: Right here where it says about being responsible, and the parental God...*

This is actually in my response to a question asked by a student. The question was, "There are a lot of people who are trying to interpret the meaning of what happens to them in life. Why did this happen to me? What is life trying to teach me?"

So I answered, "We weave the whole idea of a parental God into our personal drama. That makes us feel very important. We have made whole religions out of this. We have written millions of books about this, fought wars over this so called meaning of life." Then I talk about seeing two boxers on television both blessing themselves, both expecting God to be on their side. So which side should God be on, if in fact that's the way it is? Do you see? It just doesn't make any sense. I'm not saying there's no God. It's just that God is not what we project.

*Student: So you just said that we're working out our own salvation. I just wonder, is our own salvation trying to find the meaning in our own lives?*

I think maybe your idea there is of a *path* to salvation. We work out our own salvation right now, in this moment. Of course, chances are we will continue to live and it's not a bad idea to have some sort of plan. But it's not the goal that matters, it's how you get there. It's this moment now that counts, because that's all there is. So if you put the idea

of God sitting in the corner of the universe somewhere pulling strings and controlling everything that happens to you in your life so that you learn certain lessons, that's sort of like forever having a dual relationship with God. Like you never have any kind of responsibility except hoping that you are going to make the right choice between A and B, but you have no idea, and when you get the wrong one and get slapped, you think, "Oh, that's God hitting me for choosing the wrong one. Next time I'll choose that one." And it drives you crazy because you've got yourself all split up into pieces, spread all over the place, all working as dual polarities, all these difficulties.

If your idea is to develop yourself, what do you want to develop towards? You want to develop towards what you are already, which is what your true nature is, what you were born with, your birth right, your original, natural condition. Now granted, you do things that get in the way of that, that prevent you from experiencing that. So it takes some practice, some training, which is what the book and all of this is all about. Maybe you get to the point where you can experience your own heart for the first time, your own true nature for what it is, and rest in that and be satisfied with that, fulfilled in that way. It takes some practice to do that. And you may have to have a plan that enables you to have the time and space to do that practice, like having a place to live, enough money to keep feeding yourself, a job, and you might want to have a mate or a partner that you do that with which is fun and makes it a little bit more enjoyable in some ways, but can also make it much more complicated. Mainly you don't want to think ahead to some moment when that is going to happen, because that carrot will always be out there in front of you. You know we never let the donkey eat the carrot. So you see that there is a goal, let's say, but as you've been told again and again, that that goal is already present. It's just that you are not noticing it. So the first thing is to notice, the first stage of training, notice. And those four necessities are how you go about noticing. OK?

*Student: Sensei, I believe that being present, having full awareness of my condition, is a good thing. And it's kind of a weird thing because it seems to be something that I want to have happen to me, I don't want to do. I think that I am too busy. I have goals, and I have to achieve things. For instance, Aikido is a very simple but complex art...well this is a bit of a riddle, I guess....How do I learn this in the midst of experiencing frustration and not judge, criticize myself, but improve. I know I kind of just went all over the map there.*

*I'm sitting here right now and I realize I am not present. I have all of these self-criticisms, I'm suffering, I'm anxious, I'm wondering what we are going to do tonight, and all this stuff, and it's always there.*

Does anybody else have this problem?

*Students: (laughter)*

Yes, thank you, of course you have this problem in varying degrees, depending upon how long you've practiced. So, if you are all over the map and all this stuff is going on, what's home base?

*Student: I'm witnessing it.*

You are aware.

*Student: Yeah, awareness, witnessing, the man in the lighthouse or whatever is seeing all of this stuff.*

So there is a seeing, and that's home base. Your awareness is home base. Awareness is an essential quality of your true nature. Once you are aware, you are actually experiencing your true nature. You think your true nature is you without all of those other things, some part of you that doesn't have all those problems, all that struggle, all that suffering, all the pain, the pleasure, the planning, the confusion, all the requirements. But it's all you. So the practice is to be present in whatever you are, with awareness, no matter what is going on. No matter what is happening inside of you, no matter what amount of anxiety or fear or confusion or even hatred you feel, the practice is to be present and open to it all. That means to experience it with equanimity without preference or prejudice, see it for what it is. Seeking to find fulfillment outside of your self is human nature. That is therefore your nature. It may not be your true nature or it may be. But you will never know unless you experience it with awareness. No matter what the emotion or the situation is, when we experience it with awareness, the separation between self and other disappears. The problem is not a problem that *you* have any more. It's just what is. So the negativity, or the anxiety and bad feelings inside you melt away.

And of course it's good to practice Ki Breathing and Ki Meditation so that you can pick one of those things and inquire deeply into it. "What is it that makes me think I will be happier if I have this? What makes me think I'll be unhappier if I have that?" And if you look at the whole panoply of those things you described, they are each one of those two things. You either are longing for them, or you are fearing them, one of the two. And when you get too many of them, too many balls in the air, you can't juggle any more. That's what we call "confusion". Con – fusion, all at once. All fused together, all mixed up together. We can't see any more what's going on. So we just Keep One Point, Tohei

Sensei says. Keep One Point means just rest now in awareness. And this is all we need, because this is our true nature. Don't you think so?

*Student: Yes.*

I thought you'd agree. Yeah, it feels just like that. Now it feels good to you to be here, right now. It's so simple. There's nowhere to go, and nothing to do with it. That's why we call it our true nature. It is our birth right. It is who we are. Feel how wonderful, and yet you can be sitting right next to it and you will not see it no matter how hard you look. That's because it is the one who's looking that's being looked for. That one is everything all at once. There is no separation.

Thank you very much.