

## Letting Go Discussion – Ch. 7

Friday, August 28, 2009

### C. Curtis

Good evening.

A few nights ago, we held a five-hour meditation class and as an introduction to that class I told you a story based upon the well-known fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*. And in that story, the sleeping princess was identified as representing wisdom, or direct knowing, and the prince who awakens her, as awareness, or attention. And then I asked, if the princess is wisdom and the prince is awareness and when they come together we have presence, or an awakened state of mind, then what is the false queen that gave the poison to the princess to begin with? Someone said “ignorance” which was an intelligent answer and a good guess. But I said, “How about knowledge?”

The founder of the Korean version of Zen wrote a small treatise on knowledge. And in this essay he said that the great barrier that prevents us from waking up to the unknowable, the unspeakable, the inconceivable, the unthinkable, is knowledge. We often see all sorts of other things standing in our way and preventing us from waking up, such as pain, emotion, or various issues. But knowledge is the problem, when we finally get right down to it.

This is what tonight’s chapter is about. It is Chapter 7 and it is called “The Big Mistake.” The most important thing for all of us is to be able to discriminate very clearly between conceptual knowledge and experiential knowing. That’s what makes our practice possible. It doesn’t take any particular skill to know what’s going on. Children know. When a dog bites your leg, you know. It doesn’t require any labeling, describing, or figuring it out. And actually, everything is like that dog biting your leg, every single moment. It is just as easy as that to know. That is, as long as we don’t step away from it. This habit of stepping back to consider does present a problem to us because our education system has trained us to approach things in that very way. Our educational training has taught us that the way we find answers is to intellectually deliberate, distinguish, and differentiate and finally come up with the correct answer. And that is fine in some circles, but it doesn’t work here. It doesn’t work in the big time, life training. It only works, if it does at all, in the small time, functional training. Of course that kind of functional thinking has some use, but ultimately, there is no satisfaction from arriving at an answer intellectually, or logically. And I say that not because logic doesn’t work. It does work, in its own world of use. But that is very limited. I say that because what we arrive at through logic is not experiential and as such is not alive. It is a dead thing. It has no life in it. It is a has-been. Suzuki Sensei taught us to live life completely. This is exactly what he meant. Experience every moment completely. Don’t stand away from it. Don’t think you need to pursue something and pin it down. The very thing you are looking with is the very thing you are looking for, and when you start

seeking after something, you're rapidly running away from the thing you are seeking.

That's basically what the Big Mistake is. That's what the chapter is about. So let me read just a brief quote or two from the chapter.

***“Confusing the Point of Training***

*This is such a paradox. As usual, it seems as if our training is all about doing something one way or another, but this is not the case. Our real training is about how we react in the moment to being challenged. In other words, our training is not about our memory, or about our judgment even, but about our present state of mind. Further, it is not about our physical skills, or physical knowledge, or power. We easily become confused about this question, since we tend to focus on what is outside more than what is inside. The whole point is that we must not become desirous of, offended by, or confused by anything! That is the point of what we are doing here. If we get ourselves into a pickle, we must be able to deal with it calmly. That is what Shinshin Toitsudo training is all about. So to think that what is important is whether your palm is held up or held down on some particular technique, I feel sorry for you. Because you are missing the entire point of this training.*

*We are often confused on this fundamental point. The “Big Mistake” is thinking that we have to create or attain some sort of perfection. You are already just the way you need to be. The problem is wanting to have things other than the way they are, to meet your idea of perfection.*

*There is no revealing the nature of an actual authentic identity from the outside. The truth is always self-revealing, intimately. I cannot reveal this to you. You cannot even reveal it to yourself. It only reveals itself. Because “it” is never what you think. It is not a subject or an object; not a thing. It cannot be seen, because it is nonstructural. It is just true.*

*This is not really approachable in the normal sense. It is a completely hidden experience. It is an experience that is not available to share, verbally, between people. That is because when it happens, there is no point of reference; that is gone. How can you refer to something that has no reference points? And yet, it is this very presence, right now, completely. What is not here, is not somewhere else.”*

I see that you all have a copy of the book in your hand. That's encouraging. I know at least that you have one.

This is a challenging chapter. I called it, rather aggressively, "The Big Mistake," on purpose, so that it would tweak you a little bit. Because we can only continue to make the Big Mistake as long as we continue to be self-satisfied with our knowledge. Some members are very clever and quite intelligent and have had a lot of experience, and so this becomes an even bigger challenge to not rely upon your past knowledge in order to see what is. The more you gather, the fuller your satchel is, the more difficult it is not to depend upon it, and show it off as something special. So I hope this is very clear now. And I'll know the answer to that by what questions you ask me this evening. So please go ahead.

*Student: You talk in this one paragraph about accidental discovery. It says that someone said awakening in this way is a kind of accident. My perception of accidents is things that are without rhyme or reason or without cause and effect. So I am unclear on you use of that particular word, "accident."*

And so your question is why did I use that word?

*Student: Yeah. Are you really intentionally saying that it is purely an accident, or is it more of ah...something else?*

You describe non-accidental events as the effect of a cause. And I think that everyone can agree that we consider things that are not accidental to be things that we can explain, that we can see the cause of.

*Student: You turn on the light switch, the lights go on. That is not an accident.*

Not by that definition. But assuming we understand what is going on there is accepting a very narrow definition of cause and effect. If I brought a person here who grew up in the jungle and told him to flip that switch, it would be a miracle to him. It would be a completely illogical thing to him, because he doesn't understand. You say that it is not accidental because you think you understand all the things that went into making that happen. I can't say that I do agree with you there, because I know that I am not capable of understanding all the things that go together to make that light come on when I turn the switch. I understand that the way we habitually look at things is that there is causation. The problem is that we only see a very limited causation, and we accept that as enough for our understanding. Actually there is an infinite causation. We talked about this at an earlier discussion group.

For any thought, action, or occurrence (like turning on a light) that ever happened or ever will happen, there are an infinite number of causes that had to have happened to bring that about. Everything is completely interdependent. When something happens to me, it affects everything else in the entire universe. It is all connected. Because we see things in a more limited causative way, you accept that

you understand what happens when you turn on the light. Perhaps you know that somewhere they are generating electricity, and that it is running down the wire to this building, and that when you connect the two poles together, the light goes on, and that is enough for you.

*Student: Well, maybe if we take a simpler case where people don't know the mechanical function of a thing. They just see "If I do this, that happens." They don't need to know about electricity and all the other causes of things. The first time they might be shocked or surprised, but after two or three more times they would accept it.*

Yes, they would take it for granted that they understood it. But I'm suggesting that neither they, nor you, nor I actually understand it in any kind of real or complete way. We always try to limit things, to pare them down. We want to know what's going on, so we take the fewest and most obvious causes and we accept that as understanding the way things are.

The famous story is as follows: I throw a brick through that window. What's the cause of the window breaking? Was it because I threw the brick through the window? Or was it because they didn't make the glass strong enough to withstand the blow from the brick? Or was it because they made the brick too dense so that it broke the glass? Or was it because I had too much Wheaties this morning and had too much strength? I could go on and on and on, listing the various possible psychological causes, sociological causes, going back and back and back in time. There is no end to the possibilities that can be pointed to as cause. It's all that we can think of and an infinite amount more. Whereas in this society they would simply haul me off to jail and say that it was because I broke the window. And that's fine in the every day world. That works. But it doesn't work here. It's not enough for this kind of training. We can't explain waking up, in this limited way.

So that's why I am saying that the Big Mistake we make is that if I sit this many hours in the morning, if I train this many years, if I do everything the teacher says, that will cause me to wake up. And I say in this chapter that it will indeed make us more susceptible to waking up, more "accident prone", more susceptible to this causeless occurrence. We are waking up here to that which is not caused, that which is not born, not describable. It's not in the same category as all the relative things, which are infinitely caused in the relative world. This absolute is uncaused, unborn, and as such it is unattainable. It's that which was before everything. So falling into that we might as well describe as an accident.

What I am trying to get at there is that the way we go about things in our daily life, which is perfectly acceptable to the run of the mill society that we live in, doesn't work in this arena. That doesn't bring us to what we are longing for. So that's why the Zen teacher from Korea says knowledge is our greatest barrier. That's what stands in our way. Knowledge of what? In this case, for every effect there must be an identifiable cause.

So what makes perfect sense for you in one arena, in the shoga world, doesn't necessarily translate, because in the taiga world there is no goal, nothing to be achieved, there's no where to arrive because you are already here. This is it.

*Student: Basically what you are referring to is getting stuck in the world we think we live in versus the world we actually live in. That's basically what this chapter is all about.*

Yes

*Student: Reading this chapter brought out the question to me about the distinction between the self and non-self. There is a psychiatrist who is also a Buddhist meditation teacher who said "you have to be somebody before you can be nobody." So I wondered what you would have to say about that.*

Do you have a question there?

*Student: No, well, that is always the question I sit with. Because I experience this continuous sense of self now. But for many years when I would look I couldn't find any sense of self, and that was very uncomfortable for me. I couldn't find that sense of self before.*

And now you can?

*Student: Well, now there is more of a stabilized sense of being.*

Interesting. So you say the psychiatrist says that you have to have a sense of self before you can...

*Student: Before you can sit in the place where you realize that there is no self.*

Ah. So would you say that now you are experiencing a self, or no self.

*Student: More of a no self. There is nothing solid or substantial that I can come upon. But before in my experience, in looking for that and not finding anything there, it produced a feeling of discomfort because there was no substance.*

So in a sense, correct me if I'm wrong, but you are saying that from early days you knew that there was nothing there to find. When you looked for a so-called "self," you couldn't find anything there and were disturbed by that. And now you still don't see anything there, but you have been able to accept that and are more comfortable with that. Is that right?

*Student: Yes, that's right. But what this man is saying is that when you don't have a sense of self, that's a psychopathology, psychotic, or borderline narcissistic. That's if your sense of self is not sure.*

Well, I would have to take him at his word there. I don't know him, and he is a psychiatrist so he has his own way of seeing things.

I will say that I have never met anyone that didn't have a very strong sense of self. The crazier they were, the more sense of self they had. This is how it seems to me. A sense of self is what everyone exhibits to me. For instance there is a homeless fellow that appears to be mad as a hatter that is around on the roads these days, maybe you all have seen him. He pulls a skateboard with a little bag on top of it. He is in Paia town a lot, and when I drive by in the morning, he is always standing out on the sidewalk in front of a window and he is lecturing to his reflection in that window. He has a lot to say. He is very disturbed about the way things are and he is completely not self-conscious, but he is totally wrapped up in a very strong sense of who he is and what needs to be done to make the world right.

Now, he is completely irrational from the perspective of the regular society. I'm not sure he is any madder than I am, but I am more successful at masking it for other people, so they don't recognize how nuts I am. But he's given up on that. And I still see there a very powerful sense of him self. So I am not sure if I understand what that psychiatrist fellow means.

*Student: The other thing I wanted to add is the distinction my teacher, Hameed Ali, makes about knowledge. He talks about ordinary knowledge and basic knowledge. Ordinary knowledge is related to what you have known from the past that you are using your discursive mind to bring to the moment, which become a barrier. And basic knowledge is an arising that is spontaneous, fresh from this moment.*

Yes, that's the distinction we are talking about here. I just use the words "direct knowing" or "direct experiencing" and he is calling it "basic knowledge." Everybody is talking about the same thing, as long as they are having the experience. That's why I am not sure about the psychiatrist. Is he actually experiencing this, or is this a theory or an idea? I don't know, I can't say. But for me there's no doubt about it. What forms, when you are born, little by little by little, is a very powerful identification with a sense of separate self that is not actually there.

*Student: I think the question arose for him because in the West, they look at not having a strong sense of self as a cause of suffering, and yet the Buddha says having a sense of self is the cause of suffering. So he was trying to clarify that discrepancy.*

Yes, that seems to be a sort of backwards way of looking at it. I see, thank you.

*Student: My interpretation of the Big Mistake is that you can't use knowledge for what's happening in the present, because there are no reference points, right? Whatever I've accumulated is just what I am dragging along.*

You can't depend upon knowledge without moving away from the present experience, or the experience of the present. We want to be very careful about how we say that, because it can be confusing for people. We are so used to seeing ourselves as apart from what is going on and not actually experiencing it, that it is difficult for most people to understand what is being pointed to here. Most people basically don't experience their life at all, because they live apart from it, reflecting

on it as it goes along, using past knowledge, their history, to do that. This is why it is considered the “enemy.”

The most important thing for us, as I think I said earlier, is to be able to clearly discriminate between what is direct experiential knowledge, or what his teacher calls “basic knowledge,” and then “ordinary knowledge,” or what I usually call “conditioned knowledge,” or “gathered knowledge.” It’s very important that we have a clear, experiential understanding of the difference between those two, not a theoretical understanding. As Yogi Berra so often said, “In theory there’s no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.”

*Student: During the walking meditation the other night, I hadn’t been there for the explanation of how to do it, so I just followed along and tried to do what others were doing. As a result, I swung between seeing that I was doing fine, and being confused and trying to make corrections to make it right. And I don’t think that either of those are really the point of the meditation.*

Right. Actually there is no point to the meditation. That’s the point. Whether you think you are doing well and you are feeling good about yourself, or you don’t know what the hell is going on and you think you need to correct something, both of those things are reflections. Neither of those are the experience itself with is completely boundless, completely without a point.

This is why it is so difficult to fall into this completely normal, completely sane, clear state of mind. It can be terrifying. Because we are taught that we must have a point to whatever we engage in. What happens when you go out to dinner and talk to some people and some issue is raised? Pick your issue: abortion, development on Maui, the Superferry, pick whatever you want. If you are not willing to take a position they will brow-beat you until you do. People cannot live without a point to their existence. That is the most terrifying and therefore the most unforgivable state. And yet, the name of the book is Letting Go. Letting go of what? Of all the points, which are designed to reveal the extent of your knowledge to others.

*Student: How do you keep from falling into the abyss? What if there is nothing? Are you just supposed to let go and fall into it? I mean that could be pretty deep. In my case, deep depression and despair.*

Despair, depression – this is nihilism. That is something. This is not nothing. Look, we’ve got a room full of furniture here, and depression is just one more reactive item in that room. That furniture can only be there by virtue of *Mu*, the emptiness, the void. You can’t put wine in a glass except that it’s empty. A vessel is the perfect metaphor for us. The Russians, when they are done drinking in the evening, throw their glasses into the fireplace and smash them. They break even the vessel, not only empty it. If the vessel were a room, then shatter the walls of the room completely. The room, of course, is the idea of the self. The idea of the room and the empty space and the furniture that goes into that empty space, all of those are ideas that go together to be what we call the “self.” What we do, when we train, is we try

to get rid of all that ugly old fashioned furniture, and put all the new modern stuff in, that the new group of friends we have likes. We want the new furniture that our teacher likes. It's all the right kind of furniture, so that we can be the right kind of people. When we go to a psychiatrist, that's all he's doing. He wants you to throw out all of that bad stuff and put in all the good stuff. When you go to church that's what they are doing. All the groups want you to do that very thing.

But this ultimate state is not like that. That's all to do with form and it's way too logical. The illusion is there never was a room or any furniture or any void to begin with. It's something that we have concocted. That's why what is discovered beyond that world of form is unborn and unthinkable. It's prior to anything that can be conceived of.

A word for this is *prajna*. That's the word for wisdom in *Sanskrit*. *Pra – jna*. *Jna* means knowledge and *pra* means pre or before. So *prajna* means before-knowledge. It's that which comes before everything. We have the habit of saying that the ten thousand things or the three worlds arise out of this *prajna*, this pre-condition. But we're making a distinction even there, and that, like all distinctions, is a false distinction.

OK, I'm getting myself in trouble here because most of the people here will not be satisfied by this kind of talk. And I want to make this discussion group available to everyone, as much as possible. OK? Let's move on.

*Student: When you talk about the Big Mistake, it sounds like you are saying that is the wrong way to go. Correct me if I'm wrong here, but it seems like things that make up what we are calling knowledge, those are not small things. I mean they are one hundred percent essential. I mean, if you pick up a pencil, you have to have knowledge of how to use it. If you come to the dojo, there's a ton of knowledge involved in getting here. What I'm getting out of this is that we put too much importance on this knowledge, on data, on the facts, and we become a slave to it rather than have it serve us.*

What's your question exactly?

*Student: Well I'm just looking for clarification there. I mean it sounds like you are making knowledge into this little bitty thing, and it's not.*

No, I agree. That's why I called it the Big Mistake not the small one.

*Student: Would knowledge be the use of a pen?*

Yes, knowledge is of course use of a pen. If you want to write you have to know how to use a pen. Everything in the gross, relative, dualistic world is knowledge. And the more knowledge you acquire, the easier it is for you to function and do well in this relative world. So yes, it's very important, relatively.



But in this training, to look at things from that perspective is the Big Mistake, because you can't approach this training from the same perspective. The same rules don't apply. Can that satisfy you for now?

*Student: Yes, thank you.*

I can see that no one wants to let go of knowledge. Of course, it's very important. We're using it all of the time. I'm using it right now. It is always an important part of what's going on in our functioning world, so we are afraid to let go of it. But when we let go of clinging to that, it's not going to abandon you. What you let go of doesn't actually go anywhere. You won't forget anything at all.

*Student: Can you acquire knowledge without that guy processing it into your brain.*

What guy?

*Student: The guy in the head that notices everything. The story teller. The voice in the head. That's the guy that sort of digests everything that comes in, and makes it so that you can know things in your own language. But can you digest your experiences and truly own them, without that voice?*

I think the question is the other way around. Can you actually know something through that voice, not can you know something without him?

This one in your head that you refer to is what Michael was calling the "old man in the light house", or the witness. But where is/what is this creature anyway? If you look very closely there, it doesn't exist, there's nothing there. This sense of there being something there is like a trick of mirrors. But you have to look really closely at the mirror to see that it's a mirror. When we look in the mirror, all we see is the image that's reflected in the mirror, we don't see the mirror. But in this training, when you look within, you need to see the mirror, not the image reflected in it. Only when you see the mirror itself do you see that it has only a reflective capacity. Of course, in this case, the mirror is three-dimensional.

*Student: Sensei, it's just like it's a big mystery. So what can I ask? Because essentially I understand and agree with everything you are saying, yet I am still searching for the technique I can use to achieve this presence, or awareness of how to banish this witness that's always watching, commenting. I recognize there is a lot of truth here and yet I don't know quite what to do with it.*

You know, the sort of stock phrase that we hear from Buddhists and people like me, is that we don't really have a self. But that's not really the problem. The problem is we have too many selves. There isn't one guy in there. There are a thousand guys in there. There's the guy that likes beer, and then there's the guy that doesn't think you should drink beer. Those are just two, yeah? And just take it from there, because that's what fills the relative world. We have an infinite amount of these guys. We have the busybody, the gossip who is very judgmental about everyone else but never sees herself, and then we have the one that sees that as being an asshole.

We have the greedy one, and then the other side of that greedy one. We have the lusty one, and the other side of that, the fearful one, and then the one who says we ought to be having some courage there. And we can call them each a self because in the moment that they are activated through some emotional reaction, that's all there is. If you are reacting to a situation in the moment, it's one of those selves acting out the reaction.

Now, I know you, and you, and you, and you know me, because we are together a lot. When you get to know someone, what that means is you know their patterns, so you know many of their selves because those selves come out a lot when we take certain positions. If you contradict or praise that position, that self will be called up, either for good or ill. So as long as you are run by those reactive selves, you are very easy to manipulate. You may not realize it, but you are being manipulated by the people that need your particular agreement and by the people who despise your particular position. You are being manipulated by both of them. So any time you are acting out of one of those selves, you are in trouble. That's what we are learning to expose within ourselves in Aikido. That's exactly what I mean when I say this is mindless, pointless, empty training. And in this way it is not a mystery. It's just being present. No one said it was easy, but it is very simple.

*Student: Is the One Point one of these selves?*

You tell me. Is One Point a person in you? "OK, now I'm moving from One Point. Grr." Yes, for many Aikidoists, One Point is indeed a separate self. To answer your question, the One Point is definitely not a person. However, for many people, yes it is.

This book is really talking about letting go of all the ideas we have about who we are, no matter how lofty or low, and just being naturally true and present. Present without any judgment of self or others of any kind, without any manipulation. If you don't manipulate yourself, you are less likely to try to manipulate other people or circumstances. Sometimes it's not other people. We mostly are involved in manipulating life circumstances to make them more favorable to us.

*Student: I do understand what you are saying. And I know that letting go of positions that we take can help us not to be reactive, as you say. But on the other hand we must live and act and do. And so we aren't saying that we are going to be sitting on a lily pad with no thoughts and not doing anything, a blissful life that has no point to it, no action, right? So since we must take action, could you explain how we can take action in a letting go kind of way, where our action is positive and constructive? I realize that even saying positive and constructive is a point of view, but how can we live without that? How can we live without taking action in a non-attached way that's not reactive. It's in a way that's letting go and calm, and yet we have a mindful action. Can you explain that? I've tried to put this into a question...*

Well, that lily pad idea sounds attractive to me, but unfortunately I've got way too much karma to be able to do that. The universe doesn't seem to have that in store

for me right now, because I have you asking me this complicated question, for one thing.

I think you have to try this on for size. You are speculating. "If I let go will I still be able to take effective action in this world." Of course you can, and I'll say the same thing I said earlier, and that is that yours is not the right question. The real question is, "Am I able to take effective action now?" And I would suggest that the answer is "No." Until you let go of all those needful positions, there is no such thing as effective action for you.

If you can see that you are not able to take effective action as long as you are taking sides on issues, then maybe you might want to try it another way. You can't know, of course, until you do it. It won't do any good for me to assure you, "Oh, yes, no problem." I could tell you that. It's true. True, effective action doesn't begin until all false actions ceases. False action is that which comes out of the reactive mind, which is peopled by those many personalities that take positions. Some of them are very lofty positions, and quite good-looking. Some of them are rather smelly and grubby positions, but they are all just positions. True action doesn't begin until all those positions are absent. Then you can be an effective human being. Then true compassion for others, true response to others, happens through you.

Time to finish. Thank you very much.