



L'Abri Papers #WR01



The Art of Letting Go

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(translated from the Dutch. original title: "De kunst van het loslaten.")

After speaking on the topic "the art of letting go" in a short radio talk recently, I received many striking reactions. These brought me to further develop my thoughts on this issue. The radio address went as follows:

"Before the day begins our mind is filled with all sorts of thoughts which are repressed throughout our busy day. An example of this is the problem of wanting to be too good, too loving, too friendly, too caring, or too giving. One would think immediately this is not a common problem; with most people, it's just the opposite. I agree, therefore I call it an uncommon problem yet, the problem of wanting to be too good plagues many people. I know a woman, who in caring for her elderly father, said: "I do everything for him. I clean his house, do his laundry, talk with him and cook for him. But what I would really like is to connect with him on a deeper level." Another woman told me about her contact with her son: "He lives on his own now and I write him letters. I also send him money and call him. Just for once I'd love to really talk with him. But it always ends up being a one-way street. I do more than I am asked, I give more than is good, but what is the response? It leads to nothing" It's as if all those extras do nothing but annoy that person.

What is going on here? I call it the uncommon problem of wanting to be too good.

Sometimes it is even supported by certain Bible texts. Doesn't it say in the Sermon on the Mount that if someone takes our cloak, we should give him our coat also? Or: "If a man strikes you on the one cheek, offer him the other as well."? (Luke 6:26-30.)

If you can recognize yourself in this attitude, I would ask you to keep reading a bit further along in the Luke's Sermon on the Mount. In verse 37, Jesus says: "Let go and you will be let go." "Acquit and you will be acquitted" (New English Bible) I read these words as a warning: watch out; it is possible to be out of balance. You can do all this in the wrong mentality: all these preceding admonitions are never meant to say: keep that person glued to yourself: let go and you will be let go!

This clearly exposes the problem of those people who are too good, too loving, too caring, and too giving. Good actions could stem from ulterior motives like a strong desire to cling to the other. Mary of Magdalene had this as well when, on resurrection day, she clung to Jesus with all her might and wanted to hold Him.

Jesus urges such people to learn how to acquit. That is a real art. The art of letting go.

It helps you when you recognize it; that there is fear hidden behind your actions. The fear of losing the other person if you were to let him go. But this fear is often misplaced; just see how the other comes to life when you really let go. This happens when you leave him at rest and let him know: "you can be as you are."

Sure, we *can* actually only do this not by letting the other fall into a deep pit, but by entrusting them to God. Just like Jesus did with Mary of Magdalene. He said: "Don't hold on to me for I am going to my Father *and your Father*." Those who let go in this manner, says Jesus, will be set free themselves. Somebody learns to be himself when he or she finds rest in the knowledge that he can just be, in Christ, accepted by God.

1. What do we mean by the art of letting go?

If you go to the library and do a computer word search on this, it will spit out books written from 3 different stand points.

A. In the first camp (which I'll call the Eastern world) I found a book with a title about letting go, by Ayya Khema,¹ written out of a ***Buddhist worldview***.

In H. Beck's book: "Buddha and his teachings,"² it says on p.53 about the art of letting go:

"Two roads, O followers, one must be avoided by him who has entered the spiritual life: the way of *gratifying* the inner lusts [...] which doesn't lead to detachment, and the way of *self-punishment*, which is painful and of no use and which will, in this visible and future life, lead to suffering." This term "detachment" Khema Ayya understands as the art of letting go. Underlying this is the wisdom of the Buddha; the four great Truths: being born is suffering; growing old is suffering; being sick is suffering; dying is suffering. Deliverance, ultimately, lies in escaping from this circle of existence. The art of letting go is therefore quite broad and very widely includes not only letting go of the bad things but also the good things. Detachment is the ultimate goal This kind of detachment touches all facets of life. With the help of the eight-fold path of the Buddha, one can withdraw from material life; withdrawal from being born, growing up, declining and dying.

The Christian notion is that sin is the problem, not the material itself; it isn't creation but that which has spoiled creation. Therein lies a fundamental difference; therefore, the Buddhist and the Christian diagnosis of the problem is different. The Christian and the Buddhist have in common that they both acknowledge that life is abnormal and that man is sick and both prescribe, like a doctor, medicine to a sick patient, but the Buddhists makes a different diagnosis than the Christian in saying that the root of all problems lays in the material being itself. It is from this evil which we must withdraw along the eight-fold path.

Eventually, you become one with the self-galvanized Buddha for whom earthly existence lies defeated at his feet. There is nothing or nobody that can touch him. But for the Christian, Jesus stands central. There we see someone who suffers grievously under sin, the brokenness, and the guilt. This is based on another diagnosis and leads to another prescription: the problem is sin. That's what we need to be delivered from!

B. ***The anthroposophic vision*** is the second, more humanist approach in the West. It's striking how the anthroposophists and related groups talk much about the art of letting go as a life-lesson. I'm thinking of Kurt Tepperwein and his book "Letting go those things which don't bring happiness"³ and books by A.J. Welman.⁴ They both emphasize that each person learns two things in each phase of life: hanging on and letting go. As we move from phase to phase, the trick is to leave behind those things which only belong to a particular stage of life. Just like a transformed caterpillar sheds his cocoon. A toddler that grows

learns how to move on and let go. He loses interest in his old toys and looks for new toys. As he grows up, he gets more proficient and looks for new challenges. Puberty is a crucial phase during which the principle of hanging on and letting go plays a big role. Everything gets tried out. The young adult even gets the mandate to let go of his father and mother and cling to his wife (Genesis 2:24).

Dr Welman uses walking as an example. "When you walk, your foot touches a piece of ground which then, with the next movement, you must let go again in order to take the next step" Spiritually, in this respect, we see something similar: we are constantly in motion but those who get stuck in past experiences, stunt their development. Older parents must learn how to let their almost-smothered children leave the nest. And having grown old we are still by no means done with the task of letting go. Then it becomes apparent if we have really learned to let go when at the end we say, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." We let go of life.

To this, Dr Welman makes an interesting observation. He says that one can deviate from the norm in two ways. There are people who cannot attach themselves and there are those who cannot detach themselves. They are unable to find the balance between hanging on and letting go.

The first group includes all those people who *don't dare to attach* themselves to anyone or anything. They can't make up their minds about what to major in at college or what type of work they should do, whom they should marry, or where they should live. They are flighty, uninvolved, and unable to make decisions. According to Dr Welman this happens because these people, in their youth, were not affirmed enough and had little security to which they could attach themselves. Because, if you don't know who you are, you also don't know what fits with you. There is always an undertone of relativism in their talk: "Ah! What do I matter anyway?" "What does it matter anyhow? / Who cares? Everything is possible in many different ways." These people were emotionally neglected and a weak will is the result, as well as an inability to make decisions. Letting go doesn't even enter the picture because it was never learned. One cannot detach when you are never attached.

The second group of people includes those who cling and *hang on too tightly*. They won't ever dare to let go. These people, according to Welman, grew up in an environment of fear. During their growing-up years they continually saw red warning lights: "Look out! If you let go, everything will collapse. Keep things under control." Behind this lies the thought: "Live perfectly, because then nothing can go wrong." And: "The more perfect your life, the less chance there is of things going wrong." In this case, letting go is difficult because of the great anxiety coupled with it.

But, the Anthroposophists correctly note that healthy personal development includes the art of letting go. What is meant by that exactly? For the Anthroposophists it means letting go of all those things in life which tie us down; everything which hinders the process of self-actualization: fears, low self-esteem, wishes with respect to our children, prejudices, irritations, stresses, the importance that is placed on eating, smoking, sleeping, drinking, or even sickness. Everything which ties you down in some way. Like those people who break off relationships because the other person stunts their personal growth. This is where some critique enters the picture. In this system, the self remains of utmost importance. Ultimately, the anthroposophists rests in a harmonious view of man: a harmony-model. A human being is like a grandfather clock; if but the small hand or one little wheel is slightly bent out of shape, the whole clock refuses to function. But give it a tap (But tap it just so??), and the thing starts up again. This is exactly how it works with human beings, claim the anthroposophists: if the harmony is retained (... *exact translation: if the disharmony is*

fixed) then everything goes like clockwork. The criticism I have about the harmony model is that well defined goal of human destiny: self-fulfillment. Self-actualization cannot be the ultimate goal. It is too heavy a burden for a man to be his own God. This is not wherefore we are made. We are made for higher glory. In the anthroposophic view we keep circling around ourselves, not to say prisoners of our own ego!

C. The *Sermon on the Mount: between East and West*.

In the Sermon on the Mount we read the fundamentals about the Kingdom. We find there a special emphasis on the art of letting go. It's about a complete turnaround: away from an egocentric life and towards one which includes complete surrender. (See Matthew 6:19,33). But nobody can bring about this 180 degrees turn themselves. Human beings must allow themselves to be saved from the imprisonment that the first has brought upon them. Such a deliverance can only come from the love of God shown in Jesus Christ; it cannot happen any other way. Without that salvation man keeps circling around himself. He is as Luther said "*incurvatus in se*" (turned in upon himself)

A brilliant illustration of this is the person of *Lilith* in George MacDonald's book with the same title. She is the main figure in a fairy-tale in a style similar to that of C.S. Lewis and Tolkien (who by the way admired McDonald as their master).

Lilith is the evil princess in an empire of darkness into which an English student, named Vane entered. Vane, after finishing his studies, comes to live in an old English Manor, where the spirits of his ancestors are still around. The former librarian of his grandfather leads him to the attic where he enters the 'other world' through the magic door of an old mirror. There he experiences all sorts of peculiar adventures. This other world is under the power of the cruel princess, Lilith, who terrorizes the population there, sweet dwarves and very charming child-like creatures. Slowly he becomes aware that there is another force at work, whose light drives out the darkness. This force is ruled by another woman, Mara: the beautiful, the other daughter of Eve. Mara wins, but the real and final victory can only take place, when Lilith is converted, not condemned but converted. But Lilith can only change from evil princess into the beautiful inheritor of the Kingdom, when she opens her hand. Only then she can fall asleep which is the only way to receive healing. In her hand (which is wrapped in a glove throughout the whole book), she holds something so tight, that her fingers and nails have grown into the palm of her hand. Mara commands her in a dramatic disclosure at the end of the book, "open your hand!" She is saying "I want, but I cannot" The solution comes when Adam himself comes in (a picture of Christ) and then (referring to the words in the sermon on the mount that it is better to enter the kingdom without a hand than to go to hell with it) she asks Adam to take his Sword and to cut off the hand .. and he does .. and immediately she falls in a healing sleep and a new beautiful hand grows in the place of the old one. The thing she kept so tightly in her hand was her self!

[page 176 of "George MacDonald—An Anthology"]⁵:

"Lilith", said Mara, "you will not sleep, if you lie there a thousand years, until you have opened your hand and yielded that which is not yours to give or to withhold." "I cannot, " she answered, "I would if I could, for I am weary, and the shadows of death are gathering about me." -- "They will gather and gather, but they cannot infold you while yet your hand remains unopened. You may think you are dead, but it will only be a dream; you may think you have come awake, but it will still be only a dream. Open your hand, and you will sleep indeed -- then wake indeed" -- "I am trying hard, but the fingers have grown together and into the palm." -- "I pray you put forth the strength of your will. For the love of life, draw together your forces and break its bonds!" The princess turned her eyes upon Eve, beseechingly. "There was a sword I once saw in your husband's hands", she murmured, "I

fled when I saw it. I heard him who bore it say it would divide whatever was not one and indivisible." "I have the sword," said Adam. "The angel gave it me when he left the gate." "Bring it, Adam," pleaded Lilith, "and cut me off this hand that I may sleep." "I will," he answered.

The gospel tells us indeed, that we will save our lives, if we give it up and open to Christ, the second Adam. Do it. His love enables us to do, in the language of Lilith to open up the hand in which we wanted to keep our self so tightly. We experience it indeed as a kind of dying. But having done so we are redeemed to real people with real love. For that reason the Sermon on the Mount begins with beatitudes. All eight of them turn around people who have died to themselves and because of that are they are blessed. In that real love is a principle built in: the hidden law of the kingdom: through dying to resurrection. Letting go is the dying part of that Kingdom-love. We turn now to a more detailed exposition of that love.

2. Letting go as a form of love.

One of the characteristics of love in the Bible is letting go. This may sound paradoxical; letting go is sometimes felt as something negative. Imagine: someone you depend on lets you go, like your colleague or parents, your boss or a good friend, then you feel rejected and fall into a pit of loneliness. Because, for most people, love by definition includes closeness, warmth, togetherness, and connectedness. And letting go is often associated with emotional distancing, alienation, cold carelessness, or a result of our human brokenness. If I let go of a glass, it shatters. How can we ever let each other go in this manner?!

a) Luke 6:37

A while ago, a small bird flew up against my window. It fell to the ground and I picked it up. I held it in my hand and was prepared to let it go. Just then I thought: this is what Jesus meant with letting go, when he says in Luke 6:36: "Let go and you will be let go." In the same breath, this text says: "Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate," and "Judge not and you will not be judged yourselves." The word that is used here is the Greek "apoluo" which can be translated in four different ways: to release, to let go, to send away, and to say good-bye. Most Bible commentaries chose for the first meaning: to release, or set free. Releasing in the sense of freeing a condemned person or a prisoner. We should keep this in mind when we talk about letting go: it is a liberating action! Like that what happened with the bird. It would not be able to grow as long as I hold it. To let go is to leave free, anyone who cannot grow or develop due to his or her bond with you. You should let go this person go. Love that is hanging on, without at the same time letting go, is not love." Many times love which is too friendly, helps too much or is too close severely restricts the growth of the other person. In letting go, you are blessed yourself, according to Proverbs 11:24: "One gives away and still he grows the richer: another keeps what he should give, and is the poorer."

b) Your relation to others

When Jesus says "let go" he is talking at least also about the way we deal with others He knows, how we, albeit with our best intentions, lay claim to those we love dearly. Take the example (that I mentioned earlier) of that daughter, caring for her father. The daughter continually gives him the feeling that she can't be happy because of the way he is. That is the message she is giving. But the father cannot be some-one else. Maybe he never learned to express his feelings, or only in a subtle way. Such people exist. And the daughter would love him to sit at her kitchen table and share his inner self. She does not realize that she

hangs on to him for her own sake. Something must happen with the daughter. She should accept her father as he is, unconditionally, no strings attached. She should forget about her hidden agenda. It's just as if she grips that little bird in her palm when it would be better to let it flyaway. Is she afraid of losing him when she does?

Letting go is a form of love: it plays a key role in the process of raising children. It's hard for parents to let their children go! In every developmental phase dangers lurk everywhere--when the child rides its bike for the first time, or is going to summer camp on her own, later goes to the pub till late at night etc. etc. These situations are unavoidable, so how can a father or mother cope? Letting go and saying good-bye seems so impossible!

In friendships as well you are faced with mixed emotions. You can feel pulled in two directions. A good example can be found (on page 134) of Frederieke Klenk's book: ⁶. "Her friend said: 'If I didn't continuously let go of all my thoughts and self-made images of you - - of how I would want you to be, then I would be extremely annoyed with you because you are indeed not exactly as I want you to be. I hate it, when I'm over, that you always run to the telephone because you feel it oh-so-necessary to answer it. Every time again, I must decide if I'm going to hang on to my wishes about who I think you should be, or whether I should let that go and accept you just as you are. To love you unconditionally, with no strings attached. And instead of withdrawing myself out of hurt and offense, I must learn to tell you that I love you and accept you.'"

The art of letting go, then, involves letting things slide even if I disagree with them, or when they irritate me. In Luke 15, in the well known parable of the lost son, the father gives his son his inheritance and lets him go. His youngest son asked for it. He wanted to go out into the world. But it is rather strange for the father to do so, because he hadn't yet passed away. In New Testament times, you would not give your inheritance to your children while you were still alive. This would be highly unusual and the father had every right to refuse his son. He probably disagreed with him on this point, yet he gave his son his inheritance because he knew he had to let him go. To allow him to walk the path of independent decision-making, along a road whereupon he knew his son would face many difficulties and anything could happen. And indeed, it did go wrong. This is how highly the Bible views the uniqueness and freedom of individuals. The value of every person lies in the fact that he or she is not a robot but a real person, who grows only if he travels along that difficult path of his own actions (and creativity)

As summary of the biblical teaching about letting go I shall read you now what I found in a book written by Charles Swindoll:⁷

- To let go does not mean to stop caring;
it means I can't do it for someone else.
- To let go is not to cut myself off,
it's the realization that I can't control another
- To let go is not to enable,
but to allow learning from natural consequences.
- To let go is to admit powerlessness,
which means the outcome is not in my hands.
- To let go is not to try to change or blame another,
I can only change myself.
- To let go is not to care for,
but to care about.
- To let go is not to fix,
but to be supportive.

To let go is not to judge,
but to allow another to be a human being.

To let go is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes,
but to allow others to effect their own outcomes.

To let go is not to be protective;
it is to permit another to face reality.

To let go is not to deny,
but to accept.

To let go is not to nag, scold or argue,
but to search out my own shortcomings and to correct them.

To let go is not to adjust everything to my desires,
but to take each day as it comes.

To let go is not to criticize and regulate any-one,
but to try to become what dream I can be.

To let go is not to regret the past,
but to grow and to live for the future.

To let go is to fear less and love more!

Charles R. Swindoll in "The Grace Awakening"

c) The relation to self

Only secondarily does the Sermon on the Mount suggest that letting go is related to how we deal with ourselves. Because who ever cannot let another go, says Jesus, is himself bound to something (tied to something) That person is still imprisoned. Think again about what it says in Luke 6:37, "Let go and you yourself will be let go." (Whoever cannot send someone on their way or let them go, say good-bye to them or be able to give the inheritance) -- that person encounters something within himself.

Many times fear is a reason. You don't dare let your child go because you are scared to lose him or her. It can be as simple as that. You think "If I don't care for him, then who will?" Or "If I don't connect with him, I'll lose him and we will end up living side by side as strangers." We are constantly driven by fear. Fear to lose, fear to fail, fear to be rejected, fear of pain (see "If only I could believe"⁸ chapter 4). Fear is a bad counsellor. As long as fear controls us, we damage other people and are prisoners of our own selves. Do only fears prevent us from letting go? I don't think so. Another level to consider is the whole area of our. We have wishes for ourselves, our children, our environment (situation), our girl/boyfriend, our church, our work ... Those expectations can only be realised when we are in control. When we cannot realise them ourselves we will pass them on to our children, they end up carrying the load of these wish-fulfilments. The child gets the subtle message that if he isn't this or that way, or doesn't turn out exactly as his parents want, he will be a big disappointment to them. These ideals work as prisons; also with respect to oneself, am I worthless if I don't write that important book or fail that examination? Isn't my son happier if he can realize his own dreams instead of mine?

Ms. Klenk (in the already quoted article) has this test which lets us see how good we are in letting go. There are three questions which name here that you can pose to yourself:

1. "Am I able to rejoice in the independence of my children or my spouse, or does it oppress me to see things develop which exclude me?"
2. "Do I feel guilty if I do something else than is expected of me?"

3. "Do I feel worthless if I don't get that promotion or that job that I'd counted on?"

If we answered "yes" to these three questions, it seems that we have not yet learned the art of letting go.

So indeed, there can be all sorts of limitations and resistances inside of ourselves.

3. How do we learn the art of letting go?

I reject, as is obvious, two positions which answer this question.

We cannot learn it, in spite of much pain and effort, if we follow the eastern ascetics. Nor can we go the way of the anthroposophists and their basic approach that is ultimately self-bound.

I think the foundational law of the Kingdom of Heaven has its own base, and a whole other source and promise. That is what I want to point out in my conclusion.

A. The base

Jesus asks us to let go only because he gives us a base for doing so. The basis is God's unconditional love in Christ. He sees each individual as unique. It is wonderfully freeing to know that you aren't the god of another human being. You don't have to let the other go in the ultimate sense because you can entrust them to God. Sometimes that also means you leave that person in the care of others. At that moment, that might be the best thing you can do. You can also apply this idea to yourself. Letting yourself go means believing that your value as a person does not lie in what you have or what you do, but in who you are in God. To discover this is a remarkably freeing experience. In Christ you can stand before the face of God as a unique human being. The gospel lays this foundation.

I learn this especially from Jesus words to Mary in John 20: He did not reject her: quite the opposite: He said: I go to my father and your father. He is there for you. It is even His name JHWH= I am there for you!

To put it practically: Stop playing God to your neighbour. Do not think you should save the whole world.

Once you have become aware of your fears: search for healing. Sometimes the awareness in itself is enough, but not always; your fears can have moulded you so much that you need a step by step guide process to come out of these patterns ..

B. The source.

Secondly, it is important to realize that our lives are not just random. God wants to lead us - - to carry us. To discover this and to keep counting on it, despite the shame and pain, is fundamentally important.

I refer to difficult circumstances we fear or we worry about. I am not saying God sends us all the things that come across our path, but it is true that he will work all things to their best for those who love Him. (Romans 8:28). We can never master the art of letting go if we do not take strength from the Lord. Trust Him in his love for you.

C. The promise

That leads me to the third point: God is the big sculptor, unremittingly busy, carving out of raw materials the uniqueness of man: making us alike to His image. The big craftsman, who sees our true personhood, laboriously chisels pieces away and makes us into the people we really are.

Letting go is an exercise in dying; but that dying is an echo of the mystery of God. In nature seed does not grow unless it dies into the ground. That is an image of the Law of the Kingdom. Letting go is such an important subject because it is part of this Law of the Kingdom.

But if you do it on the basis of God's love in Christ, it is possible. It will create room for growth and freedom. God the Father has gone ahead of us on this road. Christ is King and the kernel of corn which let everything go in order to set us all free. Nature shows us this. In the rhythm of grasping and letting go, the body and the soul of a person can grow. That is the echo of the mystery of God. Natural wisdom finds its truest source in the "law of growth" of the Kingdom. That's how God has wanted it. Along this road we are blessed. Along that road of sowing, the grain can grow and its true life-form can unfurl. Set free and you will be set free. Send off and you will be sent off. Say goodbye and you may begin anew again. God is behind that and He asks us to trust. He says, "It will be well with you" because He is no policeman or judge but more a lover who is endeared towards us. And he himself has gone ahead of us on the road of letting go.

trans1: jvd.nov/97.

¹ Khema, Ayya – Khema, Ayya – *Wees een eiland voor je zelf: de kunst van het loslaten door zelfbevrijding en meditatie*, Heemstede, 1994

² H.Beck – *Boeddha en zijn leer*, Zeist, 1961

³ Kurt Tepperwein – *Loslaten, wat niet gelukkig maakt*, Amsterdam, 1991

⁴ A.J.Welman – *Ouder worden: de kunst van het loslaten*, Zeist, 1995

⁵ George MacDonald – *Lilith*, Den Haag, 1975 (English translation here taken from George Macdonald: An Anthology, MacMillan, 1978)

⁶ Frederieke Klenk – *“Offensive Junge Christen”*

⁷ Charles R. Swindoll in “The Grace Awakening” (Word publishing 1990) p.146,147

⁸ Wim Reitkerk, “If only I could believe”, 1997, Solway [translated from Dutch “Ik wou dat kòn geloven” 1993, Kampen, Kok Voorhoeve]