

Letting Go Discussion – Ch. 13

Space

Friday, March 12, 2010

Good evening. Tonight is the thirteenth chapter of our book *Letting Go*, and the title of this chapter is “Space.” Space has many different meanings. In this chapter I intend it to mean the gap, or the distance, the space that’s created when we see ourselves as a subject and others, people or things in space or time, as objects. Whenever we see others or things as objects, we automatically become a subject of that object, and automatically there becomes a distance between the subject and the object, a sense of space, or gap, a non-continuity. This is the opposite of oneness.

Tohei Sensei says that our training is to become one with the universe. I don’t think anyone ever says that it is to be separate. And yet, we have this habit, all of us, of seeing objects and people as separate from us. Not only in space, but also in time. We all exist right here in this moment. But because of this strange way we have of viewing how things are we keep ourselves at a little distance, even from ourselves. In other words, we keep a sense of ourselves a little bit distant from the actual experience of being, which is always either our sensations, our thoughts, or our emotions. If we are right in it, experiencing completely with no sense of being separate, then we have no sense of self, no sense of space, and we have no sense of time passing. We are just in it. This is what Tohei Sensei is referring to when he says, “The purpose of our practice is to be one with the universe.” This means to be in our life, in the experience of our life, one hundred percent. This is what Suzuki Sensei always called “living life completely.”

So I’ll read, as usual, a little from the chapter:

Tohei Sensei often says Shinshin I Chin Yo instead of Shinshin Toitsu. I chin yo means the same as toitsu (“coordination” or “unification”) but it indicates, in Japanese, that this is an existing condition, not something yet to be achieved. So we have this paradox. We notice that we have suffering and surmise from that that we don’t have unification. So we sign up for Aikido (or some other practice) in order to discover what is missing. But our teacher tells us that if it is not already existing, then it cannot be true. What is not here, we say, is not there. So whatever is true is here now, otherwise it is not so. Because there is nowhere else but this. This is an important subject to think deeply about.

When we first make physical contact with our partner on the mat, there is often a kind of slack or empty space between us, even though we are touching. This stems from thinking the partner is separate from you. We often limit ourselves by not taking up this slack, and so end up allowing too much space and finding it difficult to move. Normally when I ask you to do something — "Please do this" — there is some space between my request and your response. Even when you know it is something that must be done, you always reserve some space for yourself before acting. "I must think about this, and make sure I am doing it correctly," you say to yourself. When I send you an e-mail and ask you a question, sometimes I don't get a response for two weeks. What is this space made of? This is the normal human way we maintain a sense of independence, a sense of separate identity. In our Aikido movements, we literally prevent unification through not filling this space, this gap. We maintain this space between ourselves and other individuals, between ourselves and other cultures, other races, other religions, between male and female. It's always the same; we maintain this all-important space, or separation.

The Importance of This Life

Reincarnation cannot be proved or disproved. We may have many lifetimes, We may have only one. But the present moment of living is the only moment that counts, no matter which of those is true. The precious opportunity is to be able to experience this moment while being in the human form. Only as a human being do you have the possibility of being in harmony with the universe and knowing it at the same time. Animals are in perfect harmony with the universe. If you watch them you can see. There is no slack. When a horse bolts, zip! It just goes. There is no space. But they cannot also know it at the same time. As human beings, we have the same capability to be in this perfect harmony, in the same way that a river flows, or a mountain sits, or a squirrel takes the acorn, but we have a unique thing; we can be aware of it at the same time!

Unfortunately, this same faculty that allows us to be aware turns in on itself and sees itself as separate, special. And this creates disharmony or suffering. This is what I am calling "slack" today. Waking up to this misuse of the precious opportunity just doesn't happen all by itself. This is why we practice. An Aikido practitioner originally comes to the dojo because he or she has some insight into this condition. But the opportunity for awareness exists all day long, not just in the dojo. When you wake up in the morning sit up, stand, go to the bathroom, wash face, comb hair, sit down, Ki Breathing. Boom! Sit. Then get up, get dressed, go to work, always connected, never slack. When you go to bed at the end of the day, put the cover over yourself, close your eyes, and, Boom! You are asleep. No slack. No space. So always you have this awareness. It is completely natural, though it is not normal for you, and you will definitely have to become accustomed to living in this way. We practice this in gratitude for this precious human condition we find ourselves in.

Objectless Awareness

We spend most of our time with other people, or if alone, we are usually reading, watching TV, or imagining our life, remembering our past, gauging our future. For most people, this is what constitutes life. There is very rarely time spent alone without engagement in some activity. But when we do spend a period of time when there is no focus on any inner or outer distraction, then we call this meditation. Most people who think they are meditating may not actually be doing so. Most people who meditate are basically only dreaming: thinking about other people, food, or even God. But meditation is not just sitting and dreaming or imagining. It is not just another activity like the other activities in our life: a subject with an object. True meditation is objectless awareness, awareness without an object, just awareness itself. If you actually succeed in meditating, it means there is no object. This also means that there is no subject. If there is an object, there must be a subject. If there is a subject, there must be an object. "Subject" means I. "Object" means other than I. "I like cake" = subject/object. "I am feeling sad" = subject/object. We are addicted to seeing in this way as part of the notion of separation. Our very thought processes, the way that we identify things and people as objects, are a manifestation of this sense of separateness. Clinging to this view is what keeps us isolated and continues our suffering. This is why those who have found a way beyond suffering often define true meditation as no subject/no object awareness. Of course, our habit is to see ourselves as separate. It seems reasonable, since everyone around us seems to be seeing life in this same way. Breaking that habit is very difficult. It may take years of training before we finally begin to see little glimpses of objectless awareness. Therefore, we must practice this sincerely.

First, Koichi Tohei Sensei taught us, and then Shinichi Suzuki Sensei taught us, and then Shinichi Tohei Sensei continues to teach us, and even I come here and teach you. And always, we all say the same thing, over and over and over, repeat and repeat and repeat this same basic message that I read tonight. I'm sure it all sounds very familiar. But can you do it? Well, it's challenging, very difficult.

So that is why I say in this chapter how important practice is. But it is not just important to practice, but it is important how we practice. In order to practice correctly, it is very important to understand on a deep level, experientially, what we are all faced with. I mentioned the other night that it's very important that we get our intention clear. "Intention" means, "What is the purpose of this? What am I doing here? Why am I doing this practice?" We have to see very clearly this sense of separation, and how this subject/object view of life causes a separation and causes, therefore, all of our difficulties, struggle, suffering, our unhappiness and frustration. We have to see that very clearly, so that we can clearly see the purpose of the training and are

inspired to engage in it. If we just take a sort of cursive look at our lives and think, “Oh well, it’s not that bad. I am getting by. Some day I’ll die, but that will be later. Maybe I don’t have to practice right now. I will practice later. When I get older I’ll be automatically wiser.” But if you know any old people who haven’t practiced in their lives, then you know that just getting old doesn’t do it. How you get old, what you do in every moment, from now till then, determines what kind of experience you will have later. What you do today, in this moment, determines how you experience the next moment, and so on and so forth. So practicing is always now, and understanding what I have been describing tonight as “space,” or the gap or separation phenomenon is very important.

Student: Developmentally, separation is a necessary stage to becoming yourself. You have to separate from your mother, and realize that you are a separate individual, and then later you can take it to a point of transcendence. But you have to be somebody before you can be nobody. So how does that fit into what you are saying?

You were saying how we get into problems because of this separation. On Sunday you said that when we become the witness that can be a trap. But yet you have to go through stages. You know, there has to be an observing ego so that you can actually see your behavior and where it may not be in harmony and alignment. Then as you mature, that develops deeper to the point where you can let go of it. But we can get attached to kind of over-witnessing; over-obsessing on how well or not well we are doing it.

I think that’s very important, what you are saying, to recognize that there is a purpose for this sense of separation, in the beginning. It gives us a sense of autonomy and allows us to grow and develop in our own way. The fact that it ultimately turns out to be the “enemy,” or that which stands in the way of unification is also true. It is said that when we are born, we are experiencing some sense of oneness. And then, as you say, we begin to experience separation and that develops until we have developed, I guess you would call it “ego,” or a sense of self. But along with that sense of self comes a sense of separation, and hence struggle and suffering, and a schism is developed between myself and everything else. And even within me there is separation, between my observer and my emotions, my sensations, my thoughts. So it’s really schizoid. It creates a sense of two-ness. And of course the whole point of all practice is that there is not two.

We are motivated to practice because, as some point, we get tired of struggling. We get tired of being isolated and separate from those we love, from every group we know, from the things in our life. We feel separated from money, so we want more. We feel separated from power, so we want to get more. Maybe even a sense of fear, not just desire, is created this way. There is attraction arising out of this sense of self, but also there is aversion. Because whatever you are

separate from can threaten you. When you see this you immediately feel that you must find a way to get beyond this sense of being isolated, separate, and not a part of what is.

So maybe, as a result, you begin practicing. And then you hear, maybe for the first time, that the problem is that which you have worked so hard at building all of your life. What a shock!

I don't think we have to worry about preserving that sense of self in any way. I think it takes care of itself. I don't know if you ever completely lose that, as long as you are alive. You remember, in the ten ox herding pictures, at the beginning you are separate, and then once you capture and are able to ride the ox, you become unified. But then again, you dismount and go back into the village to live a normal life. So first we call that a dual, self and other, existence, and then we mature and have the experience of non-dual or non-separation. But that's not the end of it. Because this dual existence continues in our world of experience as long as we continue to be in the human body. So we have to come back. Then we call that living in the "dual/non-dual." That has always been taught as the highest level of realization.

I think, in a sense, that's what you are trying to say. So I am simply adding that we don't have to worry, there is no problem, because I think this sense of duality is always available to access, as needed. Like many things in our training, here is a paradox. Here is both an experience of unification and a sense of separation, and they both have to be accepted and lived in at the same time. We have to live dual and non-dual at the same time. If we are in either one, exclusively, then that's not the whole picture.

Tohei Sensei's *taiga*, which is non-dual, and *shoga*, dual, are not separate. *Shoga* is part of *taiga*. *Taiga* is everything. You might think that you only need to live in a cave and do non-dual training. But no, how useful is that? We have to share with each other in this world. So we have to be able to be in awareness and interact with people at the same time.

Student: Sensei, can you give an example of looking at a situation in the dual/non-dual sense that you are talking about? What does that look like?

It looks like this.

Student: No, I mean some real life situation where you might handle it one way if you were just in dual, and another if you were in non-dual.

I wasn't just being glib. It looks like this. Does that help you?

Student: No.

No. Why not? Because you are not seeing what I am seeing, and there is no way that I can give it to you. You don't get to see it from an objective perspective. You can only see it directly.

Student: But I might understand it better if I had a concrete example.

You can never understand it in that way. It's a mystery. Oh, you can know it. You can experience it and know it. But it can never be understood intellectually. If it could be understood intellectually, it wouldn't be what it is. It is not something that we can look at from afar, with a sense of separation or space and think, "Oh yeah, I think I'll go there. That looks attractive to me." Granted, I do describe to you all the time these different conditions, and what leads to them, and something about what the experience is like. But it is very unsatisfactory and even potentially misleading. That's why I always say that these words are not really it. Teachers like to say the words are pointing to it.

It's kind of like me eating cake right in front of you. If I could give you my cake, then you could taste it. That would be great, but I can't even do that. You are in charge of your own cake. You've already got a whole cake. You just have to start eating it.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could just give it to you?

Student: Well, even if you could come close. I mean, it may still be the finger pointing to the moon, but you know if you said it even with that in mind. I mean choose anything, like getting fired, or going on a date. Then I could maybe picture it a little better. But I'm still having a tough time picturing it.

As long as you're trying to picture it, that's not it. It can't be pictured. It can only be experienced. It is impossible to picture it. I really just draw pictures in order to tempt you to do the practice so that you can experience it, not to give you a peevisish substitute for the real. I don't want you to be satisfied with my stories about it. As Suzuki Sensei used to say, "I only want to inspire you." He means, "I just want you to listen to my story, and therefore decide that you want to experience that. So I will train. I will practice so that I can experience this too."

Student: Can you think of a time when you were looking at things just from a dual standpoint and how that was, and then how the shift to non-dual looked like afterwards?

I see you are not going to give up. Good. I demonstrated it in class on Wednesday night. When I had a student hold my hand *Kosadori*, and I showed the act of trying to move him while seeing

him as an object that is inhibiting me. Maybe I can move him, maybe I can't, but it is a big struggle, and he and I both are having a difficult time with it. And then I said, "Allow yourself to shift to seeing that there is no separation." Non-separation is the whole of the experience. It's just an experience. It's not two people. We don't want to label the parts of our experience as separate entities. There is just this experience. It's possible to experience sound, sight, emotion, and thought all at one time. You experience everything at once. This is awareness. So when you open your self up like that, you open your heart to the experience of this awareness that is everything in the moment. Then there are no longer separate items. This is mind/body unification and right away you can move, and it's no problem, and he follows right along because he is now part of that experience you are having.

Aikido is a perfect metaphor for this. So, I described it once again there, and also I always demonstrate it for you in the class. I always show these two ways of being, one after the other, shoga and taiga, dual and dual/non-dual. However, you don't understand them, unless you are actually experiencing them for yourself. And even then, there is still an element of mystery. That's the beauty of this life. If it could all be explained away, what would limit the value. The mystery produces that deep abiding joy, the thrill of being awake and alive and aware, and yet never knowing what's next. Whatever is next is not good or bad, it's just what's next. And it is a beautiful, wonderful thing to be alive in this life.

Does that help?

Student: It's Aikido done right, then?

Yeah, there you go. So there's an image that you can use. But the image is not it. It's just a description of it.

Student: Sensei, this is not so much a question. But I've had this experience in misogi, and also last night in class when I was being help from behind and I felt like it just fit, and I walked easily. But I'm confused, if a teacher were holding me I don't know if I could feel the same, you know?

What's confusing?

Student: Well, I guess it's what you call the "Sensei factor." Yes?

Well, we all have varying levels or degrees of capacity, which is our ability to remain in an undistracted condition. And as I have often said, when I am giving a Ki Test, the level of the test depends upon my level of calmness. The more advanced the Ki Test is, the more calm the examiner is, so therefore the more calm the examinee must be. So as we practice through the

years, we develop a greater capacity, or a greater ability to be calm on a deeper and deeper level. Which means simply that we are less easily distracted by what we were distracted quite easily by earlier in our development.

And of course, if we are dealing with a teacher who has been training longer than others, then that level of calmness is going to be greater. And there is not only that you have to deal with, but you also have to deal with your assumption that there is no way you can be on the same level as the teacher.

As I described before, Suzuki Sensei, towards the last few years that I was training with him on the mat, began to insist that I be able to move him in Kokyu Dosa. And there was no way, if you knew Suzuki Sensei. I mean he was my teacher and there was just no way that I was going to move him in Kokyu Dosa. I couldn't even imagine it. And he kept saying, "You don't get it at all until you can move your teacher." And when I finally got it, and was able to move him, there was still someone in me who wanted to say, "I'm sorry." But that was a complete misunderstanding. There's no separation. When you see no separation, then movement can happen, no matter who's there, even if it's Tohei Sensei. And he would be the first to say that. But that's very difficult. There is a lot to overcome in yourself, about the assumptions you've made. People who are smaller in stature in Aikido have to deal with this in terms of people who are larger than them, because there is an assumption that we make that this is about physically being moved. It's not about physically being moved. It's about the stability of our mind. This is big, a very important consideration, that most of us find difficult to overcome this sense of difference.

So this is just part of this sense of separation that I have been talking about. This is just one more nail in the dualistic coffin.

Student: Sensei, you were just mentioning that there are different levels or capacities of avoiding being distracted into a dual way of seeing. What determines that level?

Capacity is like strength. If you want to become physically strong you exercise with weights or machines.

Student: Yet, there are people who are born naturally strong.

There are those born stronger than others, yes. But even those people who are born naturally a little bit stronger, if they exercise they become even stronger still. If you are born a natural athlete, you might be able to excel, but if you want to compete in the Olympics, you will train, because it is not enough.

Of course it's true that there are always people who are stronger than other people. The point is, if even the strongest people want to be stronger yet, they exercise to get that way.

So this attentive capacity is like that kind of strength. There are people who have a tremendous capacity of attention from quite a young age. For instance we hear stories about famous teachers, like Jesus or the Buddha, people who have transcendent experiences when they are quite young. The Buddha had one when he was eight years old. These two people, for instance, came with quite a high level of capacity. But they both had to train for years and years before they finally blossomed into their ministry, as it were. So what they did in their practice was develop their capacity. And the way we develop capacity in our practice is through sitting. That's why I and every other teacher is always telling you "breathe, breathe, breathe." You have to sit and you have to do your breathing every day. Because it takes awareness to do that. It takes attention. And you and I both know that when we sit down to pay attention, the first thing that happens is that our attention wanders away. So we have to harness that attention, and bring it back. We train the animal. We bring the attention back to the moment. And we do it over and over again. There's no such thing as perfect, but the longer you practice like this, the more you build capacity. And if you came with a whole lot of capacity, as some do, then you'll have a kind of a head start. But that is really meaningless when you get down to it, because we are not talking here about something that is measureable or limited in any way. For instance, like the cross-country skiers in the Olympics, there is a limit. Now we notice that limit is being pushed a little every year. People do get faster and faster. But everybody can see about where that limit currently is. And there are a number of skiers that are quite close to that limit. But I don't know if there such a thing as a limit to our attentive capacity.

It is a very good point to remember, that it isn't a contest with anyone else, so whatever anyone else's attentive capacity is, is completely irrelevant to us. We each are in charge of our own lives. And the way we develop capacity for ourselves, wherever we start, is always right here. We sit, and we practice bringing our attention to the present experience, which includes all the sensations present, all the emotions present, and all the thoughts. Whatever is present, we become aware of it all, and as soon as we notice that we have become distracted, that's awareness right there, and we come right back. That's all. There is no need for any self-criticism about having been slack and being distracted.

Of course, if you begin to think that your capacity is not much and you will never be able to do that and that others seem to have more capacity, of course, that in itself is simply being distracted. So even if we find ourselves doing that, "Ah, this isn't a contest," and back we go to just building capacity. And then through the years of this practice, more and more you develop a deep sense of abiding calm acceptance of whatever is happening. And a deep curiosity and

appreciation goes along with that. You notice people who are distracted a lot, seem not to have much appreciation of the mystery of life. They are generally engaged in things that keep them from experiencing this mystery.

Student: So when you talk about subject and object and not having that separation...I see myself sitting here and you sitting over there. So how do you get rid of that. I mean it seems obvious that we are separate. I know that you say that through experience we will realize that there is no separation, but every single day you wake up and you see objects, so is that just like an opportunity to switch your mind and realize that you are not separate from that thing?

This is a book [holds up a book]. Do you see the book?

Student: Yes.

OK. Where does the seeing of the book take place?

Student: In me?

[Hides the book] If it's in you, are you still having the experience?

Student: No.

OK. So it's not exclusively in you. So where does the experience of seeing take place?

Student: I don't understand what you are asking, I guess.

If you turn around, the experience of seeing goes away, right? So you know that it also depends upon the book. It depends upon you and it depends upon the book. So again, where does the experience itself take place? Can you say? Can you point to the place?

Student: No.

No, of course not. We can't say where experience takes place. Therefore, what is subject and what is object, and what kind of an assumption is it that we are living by?

You can do the same thing with time or space. They are both big assumptions that we adapt ourselves to from a very young age, and that's a manifestation of what accounts for this sense of being separate, special, and isolated. It is important, they say, to develop a sense of separate identity in the when we are very young, but then this ends up being the cause of all of our

suffering. All of our need for love and approbation is a longing for oneness, a leaving of that sense of separation behind. And we all have this, because we have all made the assumption that we are separate without bothering to actually look deeply into this. So when we sit in awareness, we are basically bringing our sense of inquiry to the experience of the moment. And this moment always includes the phenomenon of subject/object, even if the subject is the witness within you, and the object is your own thoughts or emotions. So we see that we are always in this pattern, and we bring our sense of inquiry to that, just like we did with this book just now. And we ask, we look into it. And we don't accept an assumptive answer. And since there isn't any explanation of that, that you could give, then you just go deeply into it and experience it. And that's when we begin to experientially know something that can't be explained or told.

Student: So it can't be seen or felt.

Yes. It can't be seen, felt, or heard, or smelled or tasted. It can't be deducted logically. It can't be conceived of. That which can't be conceived of is infinite. Infinite. So that's a lot of capacity. That's why I was saying earlier that with an athlete, there is some measurable limit there. In meditation, there is no measurable limit. It's infinite. And so we just keep practicing. And there's no such thing as saying "I've got it." Because it's limitless. So as soon as you begin practicing you realize there is no end. So just keep practicing. That's why anybody who says "I've done my practicing and now I've got it," you can just know that they don't know. And if you are practicing you know that already, and you won't be fooled. That's why most teachers that I respect are always talking about all of us training together. Not you guys are training and I am telling you how. There is some teaching, of course, but every teacher worth his salt knows he's no different. Everybody is just practicing. There's no such thing as perfect. We are all still practicing at every moment.