

Letting Go Discussion – Ch. 23
What You Practice Is What You Get Good At
Friday, April 29, 2011

Good evening everyone. Tonight we have as our discussion the last chapter of our book *Letting Go*, entitled “What You Practice Is What You Get Good At.”

Tohei Sensei says that everything is changing all the time. Everything is constantly evolving. Everything is in a state of constant flux and change and evolution and nothing ever repeats itself. Everything that is coming at us in every moment is new and different. If you think it’s the same as something before, you are just not looking very closely. If you really look, you’ll see that every single breath you take is unique and new.

So if that’s the case, and I am suggesting that it is, what is there for us to bank on? You know, what do we hang on to? What’s solid in all of this? If nothing stays the same, what can we depend on? What is our foundation? Is it some kind of an idea? God? Some people would say, “God is my rock.” Well, that’s fine, that’s fine. But is that real, or is that just an idea? What does that actually mean?

So if we find that there is nothing to depend upon, how do we conduct ourselves? The name of the chapter is “What You Practice Is What You Get Good At.” So, naturally if we are experiencing doubt, some kind of self-reflection, self-attention, self-obsessiveness, then we are thinking things like “I wonder how far I’ve progressed,” and looking at other people to see “How far do I stack up against this other guy?” this other person who has been training about the same amount of time, “Did I say the right thing to him or to her there, am I treating the Sensei right, am I treating my wife right, are my kids respecting me the way they are supposed to, is the job I have good enough, do I get enough status for that, am I important enough, am I making enough money?”

These are the kind of self-obsessive things that we think about. And when we spend our time thinking like that, then we are guaranteeing ourselves that we will be spending tomorrow thinking about them too. So this is kind of frightening. Because what we are depending upon, most of us, if we are practicing self-obsession in this way, is some sort of external judgment or measure. We might have internalized it, because our parents or teachers gave it to us, we somehow gleaned it from the world and we have somehow internalized it, but it is still external. It is still an add-on. It is still something that we are depending upon. And the more that we depend upon that for our happiness, for our sense of well-

being, (which I am sure you have noticed never works even though we continue to do that), the more we will depend upon that tomorrow. So if we are not interested in that, then what is our option?

I think this is the point of Tohei Sensei's teaching, to give us an option, a practice to do. Of course, we can practice *keiko*, make smart choices. Get up in the morning and breathe. That's *keiko*. Come to the dojo every time you can. That's *keiko*. Get your body and your mind in a place where at least you are encouraging yourself to actually practice. But actually practicing is not just the breathing or the coming to the dojo. Those things are necessary. But it's not the practice. The practice is *shugyo*. The practice is being in attention in the moment. The practice is practicing experiencing experience. We are practicing being in the present, experiencing whatever is happening. We show up for it, we open to it, we follow it without editing, and we accept whatever the result is. This is *shugyo*. This is our practice.

And of course, because we see that there is nothing fixed in this world that we can depend on, when we find our practice like this, we tend to want to fix that, because we are desperate to have something to depend on. So we often try to make the practice into a fixed way of doing things, which makes it suddenly not the actually practice, but following an idea of the practice, which is *keiko* and not truly *shugyo*. We have to be very careful we don't do this.

So what do we do? We listen very carefully in every moment, and we look very carefully in every moment. It takes years of this practice to begin to find yourself actually paying attention much of the time. Even when you are not paying attention, you might notice that you're not paying attention. Which is rare.

So, if whatever we are practicing is what is going to be happening tomorrow, then *shugyo* practice is very, very important for us.

OK, so I'll read something now from the chapter:

Again, I'd like to just mention something I said a couple of chapters ago. Even though it may seem that there are different subjects covered in this chapter, please notice that the point of them all is this that I have just been discussing.

Student: During the Question and Answer session at our last seminar, I asked about using the words "martial arts" to describe what we do. And I was just wondering what you think about using the word "competition" in the taigi practice that we do.

I don't know why Tohei Sensei chose the words "Taigi Competition" for what is called basically "Shinsakai" in Japan (this word loosely translates as "examination meeting"). It may be misleading to people to call it "competition", but then we should be able to see a bit further, perhaps. Often, people say to me, "I don't want to do that because it is competition, and Aikido is not supposed to have competition". The truth is, most people are engaged in a fairly constant state of competitiveness in their lives as it is. So I remind them that if they did what we are calling "Taigi Competition" correctly, then for the first time they might be free of competition!

We look at taigi as an opportunity to improve ourselves, not to beat the other guy. It is just like our ranking system. Rank is an indication of a certain level of development. And so as soon as two or more people get together, they are going to compare ranks. It's human nature. We want to compare ourselves to others, because we are unsure of ourselves. And that is very self destructive, so please don't do it. Never compare yourself to anyone else. It is not always so easy to avoid that. Even people who have been training for years and years, may say things meant to make them sound superior to someone else, or to diminish others. Each of us has to look closely enough so that if we begin to do something like this, we will notice what we are doing. When it makes you sick to your stomach to hold yourself up as something special, or to make a negative remark about someone else, then you have begun practicing for real.

Our world is threaded with this comparing of oneself to another, which is competition itself. It is how people judge themselves and others. This is utter nonsense. For anyone who has true respect, it is an impossible thing to do that. Actually, if we do that, we are making ourselves smaller, weaker, and this should create the feeling of “sick to our stomach.”

Student: Was this seminar’s theme, “Don’t practice the wrong way”?

Well, it turned out that way, didn’t it? But it really did just emerge, or evolve, today. I was wondering last night before I slept, “What is the theme here, really?” This business of “becoming what you practice so look out what you practice,” has been sort of running through my mind and we have been training around it for a couple of months now. But it didn’t really come out clearly until today. And then I realized, “Oh, of course. Whatever you practice, this is what you get good at!” And that is so obvious, isn’t it, but also it is just terrifying. At least it better be terrifying, because at every moment of the day, we are practicing something. What are you practicing right now? What are you getting better at? What are you becoming more conditioned to? What are you becoming more impressed with?

Student: Is that why children are so much easier to train than adults, because they have less practice or conditioning in the wrong things?

In a way children do have beginner’s mind, but basically they are just innocent. A beginner’s mind isn’t necessarily the mind of a person who just walks into the dojo to begin training. Usually this person’s mind is the mind of an expert, filled with all kinds of notions. They have many opinions. They may view themselves

as beginners, but their subconscious mind is full of ideas they value. They are all filled up with knowledge, so it is difficult to teach them anything. After years and years of training, your cup may become empty, as it were. Then you may truly have a beginner's mind.

Kids do appear to have that already, but of course they are simply innocent. So they have to go through all of the "filling to the point of overflowing" first, before they can let go of that, and in so doing attain true beginner's mind. So don't think for a minute that a child is enlightened. A child just doesn't know enough to think of himself as an expert and be a jerk about it. Whereas adults do not have a problem with doing this at all. Adults feel they must know something. This human world is made of opinion. All human beings are like this, but we have to learn to recognize this in ourselves, not only in others. The light and warmth of awareness inevitably melts the ice of ignorance.

Student: So we just need to practice.

Yes, practice. Particularly sitting meditation and Ki Breathing, as these play a very important part in the releasing of tension in the mind, and hence in the body. So sit correctly, breathe correctly, every day. And please remember, there is no such thing as not practicing. There is no such thing as no action. You are always engaged in some action, and whatever it is you are doing is being ingrained in your subconscious mind more strongly through the doing of it. You are practicing at every moment to become better at whatever it is that you are doing. So be careful what you are doing!

I'm not trying to create an atmosphere where you feel you "should" do something different than you are doing. I mean, I am not trying to tell you that you "should"

be doing this instead of that. You can't really control what happens in your life. You can't control what thoughts come into your head. You can't control what you feel, what emotions arise. It just happens. You do notice it, but you notice it after it has happened, that's why you notice it. You certainly can't control anything that happens "outside" of you, that acts upon you. We have no control over any of that. We try to control and manipulate it all of the time, but fail miserably.

Some people are luckier in this effort than others, and they tell themselves that they are better at it. But they are just like you and me. In the end, everybody wakes up to find out that they cannot control anything.

So, our practice is just to notice whatever happens. I suppose in a way I am saying that you "should" notice. Yes, please notice. Please notice. Please pay attention. But I am not saying that you should drink wine or not, or that you should eat meat or not, or that you should drive this or that kind of car, or that you should do this or do that. It is none of my business what you do. And it would certainly be arrogant of me if I told you that you should do this or that. It is none of my affair what you do.

However, as Suzuki Sensei often said, I want to inspire you to pay attention, because this noticing of what's happening is what actually creates a different future. That's what puts an end to the patterns that repeat themselves over and over, each time anew, but following the same groove in the record.

So if we want to wake up and be free of the kind of struggle and suffering that we cause within ourselves, we want to learn to pay attention. That's why I say that Ki Breathing and Ki Meditation are so important. Because this is where we learn to pay attention, there and in the dojo also. All the practices in the dojo are designed for that. But you only get to spend so much time here, so the more time you can spend on your own practicing paying attention, practicing experiencing experience, the better.

OK? So, so we have questions:

Student: Sensei, at first you were talking about how we can become dependent upon outside influences to help us as we are going along. And then you talked about how we can become dependent upon these outside influences and in a way you tied that to the keiko aspect of training. You talked about coming to the dojo and just following a routine. But what we are striving for is not to become dependent upon the keiko part of practice, but we have to go down that road first in order to learn to see and become aware even of the mistake of even becoming dependent on these things. Is it our path or our way that we start to learn to be aware that we are not being present?

Look, we are all self-obsessed. Is anybody here not? Yeah, we're all self-obsessed. And so we are going to be doing something that we hope will bring us a better future. We are self-obsessed. We are only concerned about our own future. Sometimes we do things that someone else might look at us and say,

“That’s stupid. That’s not going to bring you a better future.” Sometimes we don’t make the best choices because of some kind of influence that we have picked up in our lives and internalized.

So, I suggest that things like sitting Ki Meditation, sitting Ki Breathing, coming to the dojo as often as possible, hanging out with the Sensei, going to the seminars, whatever chance you get to put yourself in a situation where what you are supposed to be doing is paying attention, there is a better chance that you might fall into the habit of paying attention.

You are not going to talk yourself out of your self-delusion. You are not going to intellectually understand your way out of it. You are not going to figure it out, because there is nothing to figure out. It’s just craziness, and you can’t control any of it. Our only option, if you really look, is just to pay attention. Just to pay attention.

So, *keiko*-wise, the more practices that you do that can help you pay attention, the better. The actual practice of paying attention, of being in the moment in awareness, we call this *shugyo*, a deeper level of practice. But some people think, “Oh I can just do *keiko*.” They think they can just come to the dojo, get up and breathe, and so forth. And they go through the motions as an internalized idea, because they were influenced by the Sensei telling them they should do it. So people just go through these routines, while never paying attention, so not actually practicing *shugyo*. They are just practicing *keiko*. And that is not going to change your future in any way. There will be no development that counts from just that. *Keiko* is important for the reasons that I mentioned. But *shugyo* is essential.

Student: Sensei, I’m curious always as to the construct of what blocks sight. If this is our natural inclination, our original nature, which is shugyo and being one with the universe (if you want to take that grandiose idea of it), then can you comment on the nature of what blocks our sight, what blocks our attention in the moment. I mean, everybody is just living their life as they always have, practicing what they have always practiced. But that seems to be the block that we are talking about, that keeps us from paying attention. It also seems to be what we are all used to. The change seems like a switch. You said “Can you imagine an apple, and then imagine an orange?” Well it seems to be that easy, and yet it doesn’t seem that easy in daily life at all.

OK, so your question is “What causes our blindness?”

Student: Yeah, I guess in some kind of round about way. You are saying that we can’t know what shugyo is by doing keiko. We will only know when we are actually practicing shugyo. And this is what we are doing in the dojo. You are always pointing out to us, “Why are you doing that?” Well, I thought I was doing something else, but I usually am not. So is there a characteristic that you could bring out that would really clarify what we do when we don’t pay attention?

Yes, we have lots of metaphors, parables, about this. We talked last week about when we are in a dark room, or a dark area, and we can't see what is going on, we are very anxious and frightened. All we have to do is just turn on the light, turn on the light switch in the room, and then we can see everything. It is as simple as just turning on a switch. As you said, it's as simple as changing from imagining an apple in your hand to imagining suddenly that it's an orange. It is just as simple as turning on a switch. Shinichi Sensei calls it "changing mind."

Everybody already knows. There is no mystery about this. Everybody already knows what it means to pay attention and not pay attention. Everything keeps going. Your life continues on, even if you don't pay attention. It's just that you don't get to participate. You are not participating in your life. And whatever is running at the time that you are not paying attention, that's your practice for tomorrow. So on the one hand you've got some sort of *keiko* activity going on, but because you prefer to live in an idealized state in your own mind, future or past, thinking about what could have been or what ought to be, you are missing this present *keiko* exercise. You are basically blind to it, and you don't get to participate in it.

To be fair, it is kind of a vicious cycle. We don't want to pay attention because we don't like whatever is happening. We don't want to feel that, so we avoid it by thinking about it. Whatever is happening in our life, if we start thinking about it, that's so we don't have to feel the immediate emotion of it, what it's doing in our body. And we can avoid it further by daydreaming about the future and the past. Basically we are avoiding struggle, but it's a cycle because the more we avoid that struggle, the blinder we are to it, and so the more it keeps repeating itself. Whereas if we pay attention and experience it, then it gets to have its way, sort of. Like this one teacher says, "A feeling just wants to be felt." If there is something difficult about this, then just be in it, and experience that, and not try to avoid it or struggle with it to change it in some way. Just accept it and be in it. Show up, open, follow without editing, and then accept the results.

So we just do this. This is our practice, paying attention. And this light of awareness, this attention, is just like flipping the light switch on. When we turn our awareness to this moment, the room is filled with light, and we have a direct understanding of what's happening. We are directly experiencing what is going on.

So, yeah, I suppose the cause of blindness is struggle and fear of struggle, and that endless cycle that keeps us avoiding what's actually happening in our lives and facing it. And like I said, some people are more successful because they are lucky. You know, maybe they were born lucky. We here in the west, we're lucky even to be born here. Imagine if you were born in Libya right now. I mean we do have tremendous advantages. Some of us were born with a lot of money and some of us were born with parents that allowed us to have a good education so we knew how to navigate our lives and make a living. We have all of these luxurious advantages that people in other parts of the world don't so much have.

Did we do something to deserve that? I don't know. We've made up a lot of stories about past lives, etc., "Of course I deserve it. I was a really good boy in my last lifetime," or not, depending on how things came out for you in this lifetime. And whether past lifetimes is a fact or not is really not the point. Right now we have the situation that we are in. Whatever is arising is arising right now. Every word that I am saying reverberates in your consciousness, in the universe in which you live. And it causes things to happen in you. And you need to be in your body and open so that you experience that. Don't have any expectation of it. Don't try to do anything with it.

Suzuki Sensei said we have to learn to listen like you are one big ear. And listen not just to me when I am lecturing you about something, but to the sound of the fan in the corner here, for instance. It is exactly the same. I have nothing more worthwhile to say than that fan is saying. Really, I am not being modest. I don't. Of course you would rather study with me than with a fan, because people would think you were crazy. You would think you were crazy. So you study with me and I say things that apparently you think help to make it worth your while. And you are still here so...

All we are doing is learning to practice experiencing experience. You have to settle for that. But we sometimes don't want to settle for that. We want the fairy tale, the dreams. Look at what we have been obsessed with on this planet for the past 24 hours, the royal wedding. It's been hard to miss because we have been bombarded with it. And why do we like it so much? It's the dream come true, at least for many people. And that's why it's so attractive. That's why celebrities are so attractive.

Anyway, we all have our own ideas about that. Maybe you have an idea that that is really cool, or maybe you have the idea that that is not really cool, but it's all just ideas. It's really neither here nor there, except that just notice what a big deal most people make of it. And what a big negative deal others make of it. I heard a guy on the radio who was really angry that so much money was being spent on this wedding. Well, I can identify with the people who think this is the dream come true, and I can also identify with the guy that is swearing on the radio, because what a waste of money that could have been spent in so many better ways. Or could it? Who's to say, you see? Who's to make that call?

The only point is not to try to change yourself or somebody else, but to pay attention to what you are thinking and feeling, because that's what you will be thinking and feeling tomorrow. And if there is struggle or discontent or denial in it, then that's what you will be experiencing tomorrow. If you don't pay attention, you will never know. If you are satisfied with acting like the group that you identify with, you will continue to do that tomorrow.

What we are all here to do is to pay attention, and hopefully break free of just being a slave to those internalized influences that we have taken in and made our own over the years. That's not easy. Particularly when the things you have internalized are really good, really effective, really smart, and really in depth

thinking, insightful, hugely compassionate and live transforming. See? We even make this teaching an idea. Don't do that. Just shut up, sit down, and do the practice. Just be aware.

So this is more talking about your question. I mean books and books have been written about your question. There is a lot that you could say and read about what is the cause of human blindness, human ignorance. Well, there's levels and levels of that, and you could go on and on about it, as I have been doing.

Student: It seems like when we are in the groove doing something we enjoy, we say that you are in the moment at that point. But I seem to experience that when there is a crisis then I am more in the moment than when I am doing something routine that I am good at. So I don't know which one is the right shugyo, the surfing one, or the crisis one. Is there a difference between the two?

Well, first of all the surfing one is pretty close to the crisis one for me.

Someone in Holland asked me a question a couple of years ago. He said, "I don't understand how it is that mind leads body. Because I can do certain things like driving without even thinking about it. I am just daydreaming in my mind and my body is just doing fine. So what do you mean by mind leads body?" And I said to him that he was underestimating mind. Mind is not just his small attention. His attention is his gift that he can use to experience life, or not. Mind, on the other hand, is much, much larger, infinitely so. Who keeps your heart beating right now? That's mind. There are levels of mind. Mind keeps your endocrine system functioning. When you have been driving for years, often the same routes over and over, you can do it without thinking about it. But it doesn't mean that mind is not leading body.

See, we think of mind as the "me", which we think of as our attention. Our attention is what allows us to participate in mind. So it is all about the depth of, the inclusiveness of, your attention. And *shugyo* practice is to practice experiencing in attention. And the deeper your attention, the more inclusive your attention is in your world of experience, the more you can experience, and so the more effective you can be at noticing what's actually happening. For instance you might take some aspect of your experience in meditation, some aspect that is quite pleasant, and it helps you avoid actually looking, and you put all of your attention on that and you get into quite a powerful bliss state for a period of time, until somebody goes "Hey!" And then you see, "Oh, right." And by the same token you might get really into the pain in your knees when you are sitting for a long time, and just get completely absorbed in that. That doesn't mean exactly that you are in the moment. Of course, you are, in a way, but it's very limited. In that case you have collapsed your attention down on some aspect of the experience that is happening. So that's why I say we want to include everything that is happening in the moment in our experience.

So don't get confused. Attention is not all of mind.

Student: You were talking about how we have advantages here. How is that an advantage? That is not an advantage in my training one bit.

Sure it is. You get to come to the dojo. If you lived in Libya, you would be too busy trying to survive to be going to the dojo and practicing. You wouldn't have a choice about what you did at all. Don't you know what these people are going through? This is a great privilege to be in a situation where we can actually get together like this. Don't you know that we would all be strung up by our thumbs in some countries for doing this? They are not allowed to talk like this, let alone go to the dojo and gather together. Even in the Soviet Union, under Lenin, there could be no martial arts, not allowed.

Student: OK, so that's what you meant. It's a privilege.

Yes. You might say that there are temptations to living in an affluent society that make it more difficult to recognize our blindness, but I think that is being ungrateful. I don't think so. Finally, I would say that wherever you are, whatever you are experiencing; you have the ability to pay attention. It might even be on a battlefield. As you know, many people on battlefields have reported finding themselves in a very deep state of *shugyo*.

Student: Very alive, more alive than ever.

Incredibly alive, yes, though there are some other reasons why they say that, like the adrenaline rush, you know.

So I always have to say that you can't use your circumstances as an excuse not to pay attention. Everybody has the gift of attention, and everybody is free in that sense. But like we were saying, if you have a choice, it's better to get up and breathe in the morning, come to the dojo, attend every seminar. If you have the choice to do that, then you have a better chance, is all.

Student: OK. I see what you were talking about now.

In sense, you might even say that this is a luxury that we have here, a very rich luxury, that most people in the world don't have access to. And they might not have access to it, simply because they are blind to it. It might be right in front of them, but they don't see it. But for most people in the world, it isn't right in front of them. It simply isn't available because of the condition of the world they live in.

Student: But training didn't originate in an affluent society. It originated in the east.

It originated in a society that honored those who practiced.

Student: Ah, yes, yes.

So, in a way, that may be even the best situation to be born into, where you were honored if you actually practiced, whereas here, nobody particularly honors you for practicing. Well, in a way they do. I hear people say things to me like, "Wow,

you've trained Aikido all these years. You must really be a master." So I know they have no idea what practicing is. If you could say such a thing, you've never practiced a day in your life.

It's a very interesting subject, and I always like to try to remember to be very grateful for the situation I find myself in, which is incredibly fortuitous. Like I said, I've been very lucky. It's not because I'm so talented. It's not because I'm so smart. It's because I've been fortunate. Now, how that came about, I can't say, because I can't remember past lifetimes. Some people have told me about the good deeds I did in past lifetimes. Well, I don't know. I can't remember, so I can't say "yes" or "no." All I know is I am very grateful. I just want to really appreciate this opportunity and not let it go away, meaning not die without making this effort. And I might die any minute here. The older I get the more that is a possibility. And so I try to pay attention as much as possible. Of course I have lapses like everyone else. But the more I pay attention today, the more I notice that it is easier the next day. Or in other words, more is now included in my field of awareness than used to be in the old days, when Suzuki Sensei used to hit me over the head and tell me to pay attention.

It's like Suzuki Sensei always said, "I'll keep practicing like this until I die. And then if I am lucky enough to get re-born, I'll keep right on going."

OK. Thank you very much.