

FOREWORD

SINCE ANCIENT TIMES, the practice of letting go has been recognized in both Eastern and Western religious traditions as a prerequisite for self-transcendence and spiritual awakening. It was usually equated with giving up all the things the egoic self derives its sustenance from. The sadhus (ascetic mendicants) of India, the Islamic Sufis, and the Buddhist monastics all shared this practice, as did some ancient Greek philosophers such as Diogenes and the early Christian hermits known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers, whose lifestyle and practice evolved into the monastic tradition of the Middle Ages.

They all held the belief that to make any progress on the spiritual path, we need to give up everything the worldly self could attach itself to and feed on: first and foremost our material possessions but also our home, rich food, comfort, sexuality, personal relationships, and all pleasures of the senses. The idea behind it was that these practices would deprive the ego or false self of anything it could identify with, thus starving it to death, so to speak. The idea is by no

means as absurd as it might appear to us in the twenty-first century, and some of these intrepid explorers of the inner realms, so it seems, did indeed attain self-transcendence and realized “the peace that passeth all understanding,” to use the words of the Bible.

It is safe to say, however, that the vast majority of them remained confined in their egoic sense of self. Many would identify with their religious belief structures, which is to say ideologies, and mistake them for “the Truth that makes you free.” Others developed a strong self-image based on their perceived spiritual status as humans who have renounced everything. In other words, the ego was able to sneak in again through the back door, as it were. Without realizing it, these spiritual practitioners had found themselves trapped again in a conceptual identity. Most of them tended to place excessive emphasis on letting go of externals, thus neglecting the inner aspect of letting go. One could say that, seemingly paradoxically, they let go of everything but failed to let go of no-thing.

Peter Russell’s invaluable book can become an essential companion on your spiritual path. It clearly shows the importance of the inner dimension of letting go, the letting go of attachment to thought as well as to emotions, which are the reflections of thought. These thought forms are narratives that become a dense veil through which we perceive, or rather misperceive, reality. These narratives — the voices in the head — may consist of expectations, complaints, regrets, grievances, worry, and so on. Many narratives, especially the repetitive ones, generate anxiety, anger, hatred, and other negative emotions. These narratives constitute what we might call the unobserved mind. This unobserved mind

is responsible for most of the human-made suffering on the planet, both personal and collective.

Most humans are still, almost literally, possessed by thought. They don't think, but thinking happens to them. The beginning of spiritual awakening is the realization that you are not the voice in your head but the one who is aware of the voice. You are the awareness behind your thoughts. As this realization grows, you begin to derive your sense of identity increasingly from the space of awareness rather than from the narratives in your mind. You are *letting go of the identification with thought*. Thought is no longer imbued with self!

That is the ultimate letting go, the only true renunciation. You are still able to enjoy external things such as possessions and sensory pleasures, but they lose their overriding importance and their addictive nature. You enjoy them with a sense of detachment, while they last. (Spoiler alert: they won't last!) You don't seek yourself in them anymore. Life sheds its absolute seriousness.

I suggest you use this book as a manual for this inner letting go, the primary spiritual practice. What is the criterion for progress on this path? Thought increasingly loses its capacity to make you unhappy! You are less reactive in the face of challenging situations or people. You recognize worry as futile and destructive, so you are able to let it go when it happens. You find inner peace and contentment in the present moment. And perhaps you begin to realize that you are not a person but an essential and intrinsic part of the evolution of universal consciousness.

— ECKHART TOLLE

PREFACE

THE CALL TO LET GO lies at the heart of the world's spiritual traditions. Not being attached to outcomes, surrendering desires, accepting the present, opening to a higher power, relinquishing the ego, practicing forgiveness — all entail letting go.

Why is letting go deemed so important? Holding on, these teachings repeatedly affirm, limits our perception, clouds our thinking, and lies behind much of our suffering.

Letting go, on the other hand, brings relief. The mind relaxes, and free from tension and the energy that went into holding on, we feel more at ease. We see things as they are without any overlay of fear or anxiety. We are more open to others, and to love. We realize that what we were seeking by holding on — safety, happiness, joy, peace of mind — was there all along. But our holding on veiled its presence.

Letting go can take many forms: letting go of fixed beliefs or points of view, letting go of being right, letting go of ego, letting go of the past or expectations of the future, letting go of attachments to possessions or relationships,

letting go of judgments and grievances, letting go of unhealthy emotions, letting go of assumptions about how things should or should not be.

In these and many other instances, we are being called to let go of beliefs, projections, expectations, interpretations, attitudes, and attachments. These aren't *things* in the way that objects like a book, a house, or a person are. They exist only in the mind.

We are not letting go of things themselves as much as the way we see them. Hence the title of this book: *Letting Go of Nothing*. Or, as I sometimes like to put it, "Letting Go of No-Thing."



THE SEEDS OF THE BOOK were sown long ago. When I first learned to meditate, I realized how valuable letting go could be — even if not always easy. In the late sixties and early seventies I had the good fortune to study with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of Transcendental Meditation. He emphasized complete effortlessness, letting go of trying to achieve some special state. Through his teachings I gained a grounding in Indian philosophy and the nature of spiritual awakening that became the foundation for much of my work back then. And it still is.

Later, the book *A Course in Miracles* crossed my path. Its essential message could be summed up as the need to let go of the ego's thought system. It offered a variety of exercises and meditations to that end, which resonated with what I was discovering and deepened my practice.

Preface

Over time, I became increasingly familiar with the Buddha's teachings. He saw that holding on to our attachments to what will make us happy is the primary cause of suffering. Thus we can free ourselves from suffering by letting go of grasping, letting go of our ideas about how things should be, our desires, our fears, and our aversions.

More recently, contemporary teachers such as Rupert Spira, Francis Lucille, Eckhart Tolle, and Ram Dass have helped clarify my thinking and approach. The reader who is familiar with any of these traditions or teachings will probably detect their influence on the following pages. But as far as possible I've endeavored to write from my own understanding and experience. My explanations reflect the way I make sense of the subject, and the practices I suggest are ones that work for me. I offer them in the hope they will be of help in your own journey of awakening.

A CHANGE *of* MIND

I JUST COULDN'T LET GO. Nothing I tried seemed to work.

For two days I'd been resenting my partner. She wanted it her way, and I wanted it mine. It was one of those squabbles that occurs from time to time in any relationship. I felt justified in my position and frustrated with her. And she, no doubt, felt the same way about me. It wasn't that big an issue but enough to leave some tension in the air.

I tried to let it go, telling myself it didn't really matter, that it would all blow over soon enough. I tried to forget it, or at least not to carp on about it anymore. I tried to shift my feelings. But it didn't work. Inside, I still felt resentful. And it was souring our relationship.

Later, I was sitting at my desk working on a project but still distracted by the issue. I knew the problem lay in how I was seeing things, but I remained stuck. Then I thought to simply ask, *Is there another way of seeing this?* I was not trying to come up with an answer but just posing the question and seeing what happened.

Almost instantly, everything changed. I saw my partner

as another human being with her own history, her own needs and preferences, doing the best she could to navigate her way through life. I saw her through the eyes of compassion rather than grievance and judgment. For two days I'd been out of love, but now the love returned. My jaw relaxed, my belly softened, and I felt at ease again.

It all felt so obvious. Why hadn't I seen this before? How could I have become so fixated in my self-righteous point of view?

I had wanted my partner to change, but what actually needed to change was my mind. That couldn't happen as long as I was holding on to a grievance. I had to pause, step back, and then pose the question, with an open, curious attitude, *Could there, just possibly, be another way of seeing this?* without trying to find an answer or even assuming there was an answer. My inner knowing was then able to shine through and reveal another more helpful way of seeing things.

Only then, in the light of this new perspective, could my mind release its grip. Letting go then happened spontaneously — without any effort on my part.

LETTING GO IS HARD *to* DO

IF LETTING GO IS SO VALUABLE, why don't we just do it?

The answer, as we all know from experience, is that letting go is not as easy as it sounds.

After the death of a beloved animal companion, for example, friends may see our distress and say something like, "You just have to let go." Something similar can happen after a devastating relationship breakup. People say, "Just move on." And while these suggestions may be correct in a way, they are not so helpful because "just letting go" under such conditions can be extremely difficult. The memory of such a painful loss still strikes us to the core, no matter our intentions.

The difficulty stems from treating letting go as another thing to do. But we can't "do" letting go, however hard we try. To let go, we have to cease the "doing" of holding on. And that requires a quite different approach.

Imagine you are holding a small rock in the air. Holding on takes effort, which keeps the muscles of your hand

tense. To let go, we relax our muscles and release our grip. We cease holding on, and letting go happens.

It works similarly with the mind. Here the grip we need to release is a mental one — our holding on to some attitude, belief, expectation, or judgment. We need to allow our minds to relax — literally, “to be loose again.”

So we should approach letting go not as another thing to do, but as *un-doing* the holding on. It is not trying in any way; instead, it’s developing the internal conditions that help the mind relax, allowing the letting go to happen.

Although this may sound unconventional — and it certainly does entail a very different approach from the frustrating trying to let go we easily default to — I have found it to be a far more effective path. In the following pages I will explain how it works and introduce various approaches to letting go that I have found helpful. They are all based on reframing letting go as “letting in” and “letting be.”

LETTING IN

THE FIRST STEP IN LETTING GO is to *let in*. Initially, this may sound counterintuitive. We assume that letting go of something means getting rid of it, pushing it away. If we want to let go of some grievance, we may try not to think about what the other person did and how awful they were. Or if we want to let go of our attachment to money, we may try to stop worrying about our finances, pushing such concerns to the back of our mind. However, the central idea of this book is that we should do the opposite. In order to release the grip our mind has on some attitude or idea, we first need to *let in* the experience of holding on. If we are not aware we are holding on to a rock, we cannot let our grip relax.

To let in an experience means to allow it more fully into awareness, to become curious about what is going on. Let's take as an example some bodily discomfort or tension. You may already be aware of discomfort somewhere in the body. If not, be curious whether there might be something you haven't noticed. Some sensation may then reveal itself. It was probably on the edge of your awareness, but because your

attention was focused on reading the book or some other experience, you didn't notice it. Innocent curiosity opens you to the possibility that you might have missed something, giving it the opportunity to enter your awareness.

When you do notice physical discomfort somewhere, let it in, be curious about how it feels. It might appear as tightness, a muscle ache, or a feeling of pressure somewhere. How far does it spread? Is it localized or more diffuse? The key is opening your awareness to what is rather than trying to change anything.

We can apply the same principles to more painful experiences that may initially seem much harder to let in. We tend to turn our attention away from pain, distracting ourselves with some task, becoming numb to it, or resorting to painkillers to get rid of (or at least subdue) the pain. We fear that if we let the pain in, it will hurt more. And that's the last thing we want.

Yet pain calls for the very opposite. Pain evolved to alert organisms to bodily damage or dysfunction. It is meant to be unpleasant. It is a call for attention, the body's alarm bell: *Hey! There's something wrong here. Attention, please.* Rather than ignoring it, resisting it, or trying to make it go away, we can give pain the attention it is requesting.

If we follow this call, and open up to the pain — taking the risk of letting in how it feels — we may find it does at first seem stronger, just as we feared. But as we explore it more, becoming interested in what is actually there, we find that what we had labeled as a pain or an ache now becomes more specific, perhaps a sharpness here or a tightness there; maybe it's a sense of pressure, a stinging, a prickling, or some other sensation.

AND LETTING BE

HAVING LET THE SENSATION IN, the second part of letting go is *letting be*. Don't try to change the feelings that have appeared or wish they weren't there. Instead, accept them as they are. Let your attention stay with them in an innocent, curious way, almost as if you were experiencing them for the first time. Think of it as making friends with the sensations, getting to know them.

As you do, you may notice it doesn't feel as bad as you thought it would and might become a little easier to be with.

Pain, it is often said, is inevitable; suffering is optional. The pain is the physical sensation. The suffering, on the other hand, comes from our aversion to the pain, our wishing it weren't there. It is an added layer of discomfort that results from not accepting what is, from holding on to our idea of how things should be. But in the present moment, if there is pain, it's real, it's there. Resisting the pain doesn't help; it only adds to the discomfort. By accepting it as it is, allowing the sensations to be just as they are, we may well find we don't suffer quite so much.

LETTING GO *of* NOTHING

As you let the experience in and let it be, you might notice that it begins to change, sometimes in unexpected ways, and without any effort on your part. A sharp sensation might soften. An ache might grow stronger, and then fade. Numbness might give way to other sensations. A tense muscle might begin to unwind of its own accord.

The body knows which muscles are tense and how that tension is held in place. It knows what needs to be released. But most of this information never reaches the conscious mind; we don't know exactly what needs to be released, or how to release it. However, if we become aware of the tension and experience how it feels without trying to reject it, we open a door for the body's innate wisdom to shine through.

Sometimes when I am sitting for a long period, I feel a pain beneath one of my shoulder blades. I recognize that it probably has something to do with my posture, but despite readjusting my position to relieve the pain, it keeps returning. My conscious mind cannot sort it out.

But if I open up to it more fully — letting it in and then just letting it be — the natural wisdom of my body often shows me what needs to happen. Several muscles that I did not realize were tight begin to relax, the area softens, and my body readjusts itself. Without my doing anything, the pain goes and comfort returns. The body does the releasing for me — once, that is, my conscious mind gets out of the way.

Werner Erhard taught a similar process in est — Erhard Seminar Training — a pioneering program of the 1970s human potential movement. He would ask people to describe a pain in terms of its shape, size, color, and texture

and to rate each on a scale from 1 to 10. He'd then ask them to go through the process again, rating how it now felt. As they continued repeating the process, the intensity of the pain would tend to decrease, often disappearing completely. By using these sensory metaphors, people were opening up more to the feeling of the pain. They were, in effect, letting it in and letting it be.

In other situations, where the pain has some deeper, long-term cause, it may not go away, but our relationship to it can change, making it easier to bear. A woman I heard of had severe pain, caused by bone spurs along the spinal column. She was in continuous pain for years before she discovered her meditation practice, which allowed her to relax around the pain and open up to it. She reported that this letting in brought welcome relief from the debilitating effects of the pain. The pain hadn't changed, but her relationship to it had, dramatically.

I don't mean to imply we should always take this approach to pain. There may be times when turning our attention away is the appropriate response, and sometimes taking a painkiller might be just what we need. Or, as is often the case, we may need to look for the cause of the pain and do whatever is necessary to remedy it.

I have even found the principle of letting in and letting be helpful in situations where there is no obvious discomfort and little reason to suspect I'm holding on. There was a time when I was exploring ways to relax more fully before going to sleep at night. Lying there in bed, I might not feel any obvious tension; indeed, my body would seem quite relaxed. Adopting the principle of open curiosity, I'd wonder

LETTING GO *of* NOTHING

if perhaps I was still holding on somewhere. I'd simply pose the question, in an open way, much as I did in the earlier example of the upset with my partner: *Could there be some tension I'm not aware of? Does my body want to show me something?* I would not look for anything but just remain open to the possibility, waiting to see if anything revealed itself.

After a while, I'd usually notice an area begin to soften slightly. As I stayed with the sensations, allowing the softening to continue, I'd find muscles that I thought were already relaxed beginning to relax even more. Then my body might spontaneously adjust its position a little in response to the increased relaxation. Other muscle groups followed, as my whole body sank into a deeper relaxation.

And before I knew it, I was asleep.

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

BEFORE GOING FURTHER into different ways of letting go, let's first explore what lies behind our holding on. Why do we cling to our beliefs and theories, our judgments and grievances, our feelings and our stories? Why do we become so attached to our possessions, our self-image, and what we think will make us happy?

To answer that, we should first ask, *What do we want?*

Ask the proverbial person on the street what they want, and you might get answers such as: a better-paying job, a healthier body, a meaningful relationship, a more spacious home, a good vacation, reconnecting with an old friend, or some special treat. Dig deeper and ask why they want these things, and you will hear responses such as: to be loved and appreciated, to feel safe, to be in closer community, to be stimulated.

But why do we want these things? What is the underlying motivation? Again, answers may vary: pleasure, happiness, contentment, peace of mind, enjoyment, fulfillment,

ease. Notice a common theme here? All these answers point to a better state of mind.

This is the fundamental drive behind all our needs. We seek security because it makes us feel better. We want physical comforts so we can relax and be at ease. We enjoy having mental stimulation and emotional nourishment. We are happier if we have a positive self-image and others approve of us. It feels good to love and be loved.

The gratification need not be immediate. Most of us do not enjoy visiting the dentist, but we go hoping to avoid more pain later. Or we may forgo some personal gain and help another in need because we feel the better for it. Even the masochist who sets out to cause himself pain does so because he derives some satisfaction from it.

This is our true bottom line: a better state of mind.

When we hear the term *bottom line*, we usually think of money: How much profit is there? How much does it cost? But money is not our ultimate bottom line. It is merely the means to buy the things, opportunities, experiences, or whatever else we think will make us happy. The fundamental criterion, conscious or unconscious, behind all our decisions is: *Will I feel better for it? Will I be happier, more content, more at ease?*

We may think we seek some external goal, but in truth we seek it hoping that, in one way or another, we will feel better inside.

As the Dalai Lama once remarked, "In the final analysis, the hope of every person is simply peace of mind."

RETURNING *to* NATURAL MIND

IT MIGHT SOUND HEDONISTIC to say that we're all seeking happiness. But it is completely natural — a self-centeredness in service of our biological survival.

When there are no imminent threats to our well-being, when our needs are met and we have nothing to worry about, we feel relaxed and at ease. This is the mind in its natural unperturbed state, untarnished by complaints, desires, or worries. I call it *natural mind*.

By natural I do not mean “normal.” Normal means the norm or the average. A normal state of mind would be what most people experience most of the time — which, for the vast majority, is *not* relaxed and at ease. I am speaking of the mind before it is sullied by wants and fears. It is how we feel when we're not threatened or worried. Put simply, when everything is OK in our world, we feel OK inside.

When, on the other hand, some need or threat arises, the contentment of natural mind is replaced by feelings of discontent. The feelings associated with being cold or hungry, for example, are not so pleasant: indeed, if we are

extremely cold or hungry, the experience can be painful. And so it should be. To feel at ease in a dangerous situation could jeopardize our survival.

Discomfort, pain, and suffering are intrinsically unpleasant experiences. They are a call for attention, telling us that something needs taking care of. So if we're cold, we warm ourselves by moving closer to a fire, and if we're hungry we eat something. Once the need has been satisfied or the danger averted, the mind returns to its natural state of contentment. All is well again.

One might expect there to be a natural alternation between these two modes of functioning: the open, relaxed awareness of natural mind, on the one hand, interspersed with periods of discontent arising from some imminent need or threat, on the other — ideally, spending most of our time in a contented state.

Other animals manage this easily enough. A dog with nothing to do will sit and watch the world go by, pricking its ears at a sound of potential interest. Then, if everything is OK, it will relax again. But human beings are different. We set ourselves apart from just about every other creature by spending most of our time in discontent.

Why is this? Why are we so seldom content? One would think that we humans — with all our understanding of the world and the many technologies we've invented to change it — would have taken care of our needs and banished most potential threats. We should be even more contented than our pets. Where did we go wrong?

AN INNOVATIVE SPECIES

HUMAN BEINGS' UNIQUE ABILITY to create a better world for themselves stems from three major evolutionary developments.

In just a few million years — a mere blink in evolutionary time — our ancestors' brains tripled in size. Areas responsible for planning, decision-making, and social awareness all grew rapidly, along with areas involved with cognition and the processing of language.

The facial muscles and the larynx also changed, allowing our ancestors to make the complex sounds needed for speech. All animals learn from experience, but with speech, humans could learn not only from their own experiences but also from those of others. They could tell each other what they had seen, heard, or discovered and so build up a collective body of knowledge, far greater than any one individual ever could.

Speech meant not only that people could talk to each other but also that they could talk to themselves, in their own minds — the essence of what we commonly call

“thinking.” Thinking allowed them to identify patterns in their experience, form concepts, and make generalizations. They could apply reason, understand the world, decide on alternative courses of action, and make plans.

However, before all this could be put to good use, they needed to be able to turn those plans into action. This is where another unique feature came into play: the human hand. Or to be more precise, the fully opposable thumb, which turned the hand into a most elegant and versatile organ with which to manipulate the world.

Combine this power to change things with a growing body of knowledge and the ability to think, reason, and make choices, and you have a creature able to mold the clay of Mother Earth into a diversity of new forms.

We learned to make edges on stones, giving us axes, knives, and points to our spears. We built shelters for ourselves; we made clothes. We tamed fire, which helped keep us warm, cook food, and later, smelt metals. We developed agriculture, sowed seeds, and irrigated the land. We invented the wheel, developed new modes of transport, found new sources of energy, and created new materials. And we invented better and better tools with which to do all these things. We’ve amplified the power inherent in the human hand into technologies that can change the world in ways that would have been unimaginable to our ancestors.

The opposable thumb had one other crucial significance: it made writing possible, allowing us to record the wealth of knowledge we were gaining. And we did not stop at writing; we progressed to printing, then the telephone, radio, television, computers, and the internet.

Behind all these developments lay a recurrent theme. We wanted to live longer and healthier lives; we sought to reduce pain and suffering; we wanted to create a world in which we felt safe and secure. We wanted to feel more at ease and content. To be happy. We may not have been aware of it, but we were seeking ways to return to natural mind.

And yet, despite all our advances, things haven't worked out as well as we might have hoped. Are people in the developed world any happier than the Yanomami Indians in the Brazilian rain forest or the Sentinelese of the Andaman Islands — two cultures until recently largely untainted by the modern world?

Are we any happier today than we were fifty years ago? A study in 1955 found that one-third of the adult US population were happy with their lives. The same study repeated thirty-five years later found that the number of people happy with their lives had not changed — despite the fact that per capita productivity and consumption had both doubled over this time.

So why, despite all this progress, are we still not happy? The answer lies in another factor essential to our creativity — imagination.