

Meditative Story Transcript — Letting Go meditation

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: If you could go back in time, if I gave you a magic time machine, and you could go back and talk to yourself, to that Arne, who is a little bit younger, who's learning, getting a bit annoyed and frustrated... What would you tell him?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: You can never do it first try, but if you continue at this, you'll still get it in the future. Cause, I know.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: That is a good message for that, Arne, isn't it?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Yeah.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Over the Easter holidays, I had the good fortune to go away with my family for a week in the sun. We went to Tenerife, an island of Spain off the west coast of Africa. It was beautifully warm, and along with the walk up a volcano, discovering a black sand beach, watching the kids try out a new set of disco moves, I think what my wife and I enjoyed the most was a few days of not having to do a single chore. Heaven indeed. That said, it was a particularly special holiday for my seven year old son, who was trying to do a brave, new thing.

Arne has been working hard on his swimming over the past year, specializing mainly in breast stroke but also finding time to develop the backwards jellyfish, which is much harder than he makes it look, I can tell you. And for this week he was determined: "I'm going to get so good Daddy that I can swim by myself. You wont need to be so close to me all the time."

So for pretty much four, five hours a day he's working at it, keeping a good body position in the water, consistent strokes, relaxed breathing — all with no floats. Swimming mainly in the shallow pool, and every now and then running up the stairs for a go on the waterslide, another new thing for him and all part of finding new confidence.

Three days into the holiday, Arne's in his rainbow animal swim trunks learning the hotel's house dance. I call him over and ask him if he's ready for me to test his swimming. He nods excitedly and we slip into one of the deeper main pools. Okay wee man, how about this? I'll swim alongside you just in case, but how about we go from these steps to those ones over there. It's maybe eight meters away and looks a reasonably clear path between the various inflatable turtles and giant doughnuts. He's amped to get it right so he's going fast, the circular movements of his breast stroke a touch frantic at times, but he makes it, beaming.

We make a deal. I tell him I'll let him do his own thing — without me next to him — if he respects his limits. Arne has a tendency to be super enthusiastic about activities which is lovely, but for this one I don't want him getting out of his depth while he's still finding his way. We fist bump on it and he scoots off for another round on the water slide. He's having an amazing time, trying

everything, making friends. It's beautiful to see. It's especially poignant for me, given that body image issues I had as a child meant that swimming was ... well I dreaded it. Seeing Arne's freedom, and being part of helping it happen, feels like a big milestone for both of us.

It's a kind of letting go, isn't it?

As a parent, you spend so much of your attentional bandwidth, especially when they're young, on making sure they're safe and okay. So this for me is one of the first instances of letting go of that and giving him his freedom — earned by his hard work of course.

Sitting up on a sun lounger, reflecting on what has just happened, I realize my role has changed from supporting to watching. Instead of literally supporting him while he swam, being close to him, my job now is to watch how he's doing. Giving him the confidence as he improves, but without crowding his space.

This is an important movement too in mindfulness practice. Learning the difference between two very different modes of attention: one where it is heavily involved with managing the experience and one where it is detached but still aware. Let's see if we can get a sense of it ourselves now.

And we'll start by taking two, no three deep breaths, aware of the sensations of the breath as you do.

One, one.

Two, two.

Three, three.

Keeping our awareness super close to these deep breaths.

Breathing at your own pace.

One, one.

Two, two.

Three, three.

So here, we've been heavily involved in the breath. Dictating its length, influencing how it is.

Get a sense for what that feels like.

Now for the untangling. Moving from supporting the breath, intervening with your attention and instead, now just watching it.

It can be tricky, especially after we've just been so interventionist.

Watching the breath this time, without changing it in any way.

So that's the idea but notice how we still try to change it by habit.

It's a real skill. To watch experience closely, but not intervene.

And as we practice letting go, there is much to learn about where we still get tangled up. Letting go doesn't happen right away. It's an unentangling. Thread by thread.

With Arne's new independence as a swimmer giving me more sunlounger time, I remember a different kind of letting go he experienced — learning to cycle. In a rare enlightened moment of city planning, a beautiful mature tree-lined avenue near where we live, was closed to cars, creating a now permanent promenade uniting the parkland on both sides. It's perfect for learning to cycle — long, straight, looks a little bit epic.

But it just didn't work. Arne really didn't enjoy it and speaking to him about it, the nub was that he wasn't that into doing something he wasn't good at. He liked being good at things and didn't like not being able to cycle well the moment the training wheels came off.

Then, months later something changed. He became focused on the result — that of being able to cycle by himself — and maybe get a new bike for his birthday, not just the hand me down he was learning on. He recognized that you have to start bad at something before you get good. With this new mindset, he got it pretty much right away. The guy is a born cyclist actually. Lightweight frame, powerful legs, it's a delight to watch.

This then, is a different flavor of letting go.

With the swimming, it was about me — me moving from being involved to being a watcher.

With the cycling, it's him — him letting go of the need for training wheels. I'm not having to hold him up, it's for him to choose when to remove the supports.

They might sound similar, but from an attentional or mindfulness perspective, it's quite different.

In the first letting go, we learned to disentangle our need to be involved.

In this second letting go, we're not letting go of entanglement, we're letting go of training wheels.

And a simple way to do that is to try meditating without guidance, without me and my wider team here. Fear not, we'll be here whenever you need us but this week, how about you try

doing some meditation by yourself. Maybe you do already. But if you don't, then give it a go, even for a minute.

A good way to do that is to choose a technique that you've enjoyed in the past:

There's body awareness, placing the attention on a particular part of the body or the sense of the body as a whole.

There's stability practice, where you choose something to place the attention on and just bring it back again and again when your awareness wanders away.

There's loving kindness, where we say phrases meaningful to us, sending kind thoughts to ourselves and to others.

There's insight practice, where we are more interested in our reaction to what is happening in body and mind than what is happening itself.

Then there's the technique of no technique, where we just allow things to happen.

Choose one that calls to you, and give it a go this week.

Happy with the knowledge that you'll probably think you're not doing great.

But like Arne, each apparent failure is a step closer to independence.

So thank you Arne for being so good at life.

And thank you. You're alright too.

And to close up, we thought you might like to hear from Arne himself.

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Hi. I'm Arne Gunatillake.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: So Arne, I just want to ask you a couple of questions about ... obviously you remember we went on holiday recently to Tenerife.

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Yeah.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: We had a really good time. We did loads of swimming. That's the other thing ... you did the most swimming out of everyone. What do you remember about swimming at Tenerife?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: I was a really accurate swimmer, unlike before.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: And before, would you have to use to swim...

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: The float, noodle.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: And, where would I be when you were swimming?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Beside me.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: During this holiday, you were able to swim by yourself, without us being too close, and without using floats. How did it feel for that to happen?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Like, I could move wherever I wanted in the water. It was nice.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: And you felt happy?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Yeah.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Did you feel proud about that as well?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Yes.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: And what are you looking forward to doing next in the swimming pool?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Mmmm diving underwater, staying underwater for minutes, for 30 seconds in the water.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Wow, that's a good ambition. And when I was thinking about you swimming, Arne, it reminded me of when you learned to ride a bike. Do you remember that time?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Yeah.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: When you first tried to learn to ride a bike, I remember actually, you didn't enjoy it so much.

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Yeah.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: And do you remember why that was?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: I thought I could do it on first try.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: That's right, and you were getting a bit frustrated.

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Yeah, but I think it might have been because I might have fell a lot on the bike.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Yeah, you did fall a few times, but then, we waited a few weeks and a couple of months actually. And then, we tried again. I remember letting go, and mommy doing the video of you doing it, I felt really happy. How did you feel doing that?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Amazing.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: If you could go back in time, if I gave you a magic time machine, and you could go back and talk to yourself, to that Arne, who is a little bit younger, who's learning, getting a bit annoyed and frustrated. What would you tell him?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: You can never do it first try, but if you continue at this, you'll still get it in the future. Cause, I know.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: That is a good message for that, Arne, isn't it?

ARNE GUNATILLAKE: Yeah. We'd love to hear your personal reflections from today's episode. You can find us on all your social media platforms through our handle @meditativestory. Or, you can email us at: hello@meditativestory.com.