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The Struggle of Letting Go

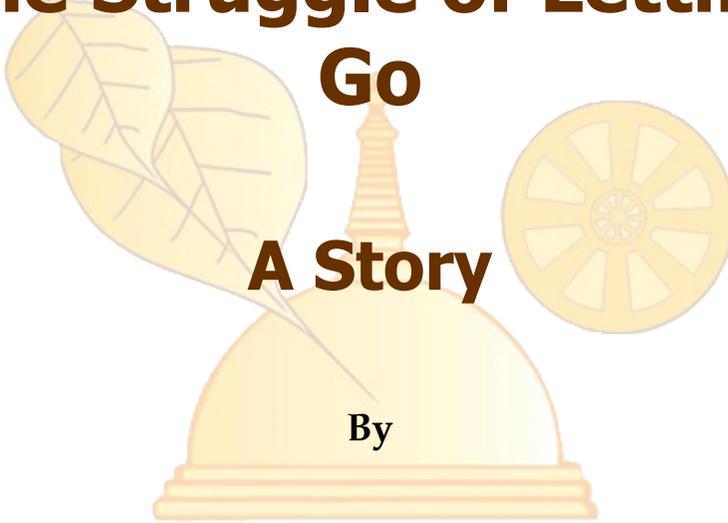
A Story

Suvimalee Karunaratna



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By

Suvimalee Karunaratna

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The Struggle of Letting Go

A Story

Kapuri the she-elephant, noticed that a new dog, or rather, a new dam, had come into the temple premises. There were, of course, two canines residing there already, Kalu and Sudu. When the new dam walked in, somewhat timidly at first, Kapuri noticed that Sudu became greatly agitated. She growled and snarled and barked no end at the newcomer, despite the latter's gentle demeanour, and even tried to attack her. The newcomer, whose name was Sukhī, settled herself down with great composure and decorum under the Bo tree.

“Please go away,” she told Sudu when Sudu came up to her, barking all the while. “I have only come here to meditate.”

“So they all say at the start,” Sudu said, snarling. “I know all those tricks and tactics. But once they have a toehold here, they begin to behave as if they own the

place. Be off with you! There's no room for the likes of you here."

"Who says so?" Kalu asked, coming up to them. "Who says there's no room?"

Sudu became livid with rage. "You keep out of this. The conversation here is entirely between me and that creature over there. What have you got to do with it?"

Kalu shrugged, "I'm just a peacemaker, that's all."

"This is not a home for wretched destitutes who bring in all manner of mangy diseases," Sudu continued. "And don't you be filling the whole place with pups."

Sukhi ignored her and Sudu finally left her in peace, though thereafter she always remained on a war-footing with Sukhi taking umbrage at all kinds of imagined transgressions. She even laid down rules for Sukhi to observe. Sukhi was to keep a wide berth from the monks' residential quarters and the kitchen and confine herself to the tree area and the meditation hall only, which Sukhi would have done in any case. However, the temple stewards and the meditators were very kind and always gave Sukhi leftovers from their food so she didn't starve.

In due course, it was not Sukhi but Sudu who gave birth to a litter of pups. She delivered four pups, and a

few days after the event Sukhi decided to visit them. She approached them warily, uncertain of Sudu's reaction to her.

"How are you?" Sukhi asked from afar, "And the new arrivals?"

"Alright," came the cool reply. "Don't come closer; you might frighten them."

"Don't worry, I won't," Sukhi said, a trifle hurt. "I'll keep my distance."

"Good."

For a minute or two Sukhi watched them wistfully. She adored pups and longed to lick and cuddle them.

When Sukhi returned to the Bo tree courtyard, she sat and wondered why Sudu resented her presence with such intensity. How was she getting in Sudu's way? Sukhi had had her fair share of troubles in life and now all she wanted was a little place where she could sit and meditate in peace.

"Don't worry about Sudu," said Kapuri kindly to Sukhi over the parapet wall that surrounded the Bo tree area.

"How did you know I was thinking of her?"

"I have eyes and ears and I wasn't born yesterday."

"It is difficult to ignore rudeness," Sukhi said.

“Don’t waste your valuable time, my dear,” Kapuri advised. “Sudu is a victim of excessive papañca.”

“What’s that?”

Kapuri looked at the tortoise who was close by near the edge of the Bo tree. “You tell her,” she said.

“Well, you see, we are all subject to papañca,” the tortoise explained, “but some of us are victims of it more than others. To put it in a nut shell, papañca is the wrong way of looking at things.”

“But why are we all victims of it?”

“Because we see things subjectively, through ego-tinted glasses, from the point of view of ‘I’ and ‘me’ and ‘mine.’ Our view is blurred by all kinds of prejudices, complexes, fears, false premises, and conjectures which all stem from the notion of an ego.”

“So, how can we see things in the correct way?”

“The purpose of mental culture is to purify our minds of defilements so we can clean our lenses, so to speak, and see things clearly rather than through ego-tinted glasses.”

“But I don’t do any wrong here. At least I’m not aware that I do any wrong. Why should my presence cause Sudu to resent me?”

“Maybe she sees your tendency to cling. You see,

we all have clinging, there is no denying that. So, maybe she thinks you may cling to the objects of her clinging, over which she wants exclusive rights. Therefore you pose a threat to her.”

“If that’s the way she thinks, perhaps I should leave this place. Then she can have exclusive rights to this place and to everything here.”

“Running away from unpleasant situations is not a solution. Wherever you go, there will be people you don’t like or people who don’t like you or situations you don’t like. It is better to train your mind in such a way that you do not have excessive yearning for people or things you like or excessive aversion to people or things you dislike. You must train your mind to be unperturbed at all times.”

“Oh.”

“Now try to discipline your thoughts and cultivate mettā (loving kindness) so that you won’t react to Sudu’s acts of aggression and aversion to you.”

“It sounds difficult but I’ll try.”

“Very good. That method is really better than going away from this place. Think what an excellent opportunity you have here to train your mind in acquiring equanimity.”

“I know.”

“I have seen so many who run away from unpleasant situations created by those like Sudu,” Kapuri observed, “and I have also seen the victims ultimately ending up worse than the victimizers. They revile the victimizers so much that they make just as much unwholesome karma for themselves from their aversion as the victimizers do from theirs.”

“I must confess I do have a tendency to run away from unpleasant situations,” Sukhi admitted, “but I don’t make a habit of reviling others.”

“Good, but this time try not to run away, discipline your mind to be equanimous. Cultivating mettā helps a lot.”

“But sometimes, if the conditions are really uncongenial, isn’t it more advisable to leave? Even the Buddha left when the conditions were really uncongenial.”

“What you say is true. One has to judge and see if a place is conducive to one’s own well-being and the well-being of others. If one is really earnest about cultivating mindfulness and concentration and working out one’s deliverance from saṃsāra, then a place of solitude is better than uncongenial surroundings loaded with tensions. That is why a householder’s spiritual progress is considered gradual whereas a hermit, if earnest, can advance more

quickly. Of course, it goes without saying, there have been householders who have attained the path and hermits who have not."

"I shall have to think this out carefully," Sukhi said, knitting her brows. "This is such an ideal place in which to meditate... and yet, it is just my luck that even here there has to be a fly in the ointment."

Kapuri smiled. "It is always like that, my dear. That is dukkha; separation from the pleasant, association with the unpleasant, and having unfulfilled yearnings."

When the pups grew up, try as she might, Sudu couldn't keep them all to herself. They would stray away, giving full vent to their curiosity about their surroundings. They would sometimes come bounding to where Sukhi was seated under the Bo tree to observe her with great interest. One particular saucy pup who had a black patch over one eye came right up to her.

"What are you doing there?" he asked, sitting on his haunches and resting one side of his milk-filled belly on the ground.

"I'm meditating."

"What's that?"

"I'm watching my breath as it hits my upper lip."

“Can I try it, too?”

“Yes, if you like.”

He flopped by her side and imitated her posture. No sooner he sat by her than Sudu’s barking was heard in the distance.

“I think your mother is calling you. Do go,” Sukhi said, but the pup was trying hard to watch his breath and trying to feel it on his upper lip. All the while, Sudu’s barking became louder and closer. Finally, she came up to the Bo tree and surveyed them, her whole body trembling with rage.

“Didn’t you hear me calling? Come here at once!” she scolded the pup. As he got up and trotted towards her, she glared at Sukhi before stomping away.

After some time, though the pups had been doing well, they suddenly succumbed to a terrible purging illness. They became dehydrated and very ill. Sukhi couldn’t bear to see them ill and shrivelling up. She went quietly up to Sudu.

“You must eat those herbs that grow near the jak tree by the hedge,” she advised, “then, when they drink your milk, they will get cured.”

“Thank you,” Sudu said coldly, “but the monks are treating them. In any case, I’m the mother and I should know better than anyone else what to give my

children and when to give it to them. Besides, it is very important that my children understand who is the authority around here.”

“Of course,” said Sukhi flushing. “Isn’t there anything I can do? Shall I make a vow and pray for them?”

“Don’t worry, every minute of the day I am praying for my children. What is more effective than a mother’s prayers?”

“Yes, we don’t like others coming and interfering and undermining our authority,” Kalu, who had arrived there, remarked. “Remember, we’re in control here.”

Sukhi retired to the Bo tree and sat down dejectedly.

“Why are you running to see those pups all the time?” Kapuri asked her over the crennelated wall. “Didn’t we advise you to leave Sudu alone and get on with your practice?”

“But should we not help others when they are in trouble?”

“Only if they want our help.”

“But why do they dislike my wanting to help? What on earth do I do or say to give them the impression I am trying to undermine their authority? All they think

of is who is in control here— hierarchy.”

“No matter what you say or do, whatever your motives are, they will interpret your words and actions to suit their own mental constructs, so leave them alone and get on with your practice.”

What hurt Sukhi was how Kalu also had changed towards her. In the past he used to exchange a few cordial greetings with her now and again, but not any more. Now, as he passed her by under the Bo tree, he would scowl and glare at her. There seemed to be a simmering anger inside him and Sukhi was at a loss to understand why. His aggressiveness increased when other male and female dogs came to talk on the Dhamma with Sukhi. Once when Sukhi went towards the back courtyard of the temple, she overheard Sudu bending Kalu’s ears with an unabashed tirade.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Do you call yourself a dog or a mouse? Why don’t you assert yourself and drive away all those riffraff who come in here?”

“Why should I?”

“Can’t you see that they are bringing in all kinds of diseases? No wonder the pups are falling ill all the time. All because of that creature sitting under that Bo tree pretending to be a great saint!”

After that, Kalu became more aggressive towards Sukhi's circle of Dhamma friends. He barked unceasingly at newcomers and even got into scuffles with them. Once he had a right royal fight with a well-built dog and they would have fought unto death if the monks and stewards had not come running out and doused the two dogs with buckets of water. Kalu had his ears torn and several injuries. Sukhi was very frightened but Sudu was proud of Kalu.

"Now her faithful listeners will think twice about coming in here," Sudu told Kalu, licking his wounds and nuzzling him. "I am so proud of you. Even the pups are beside themselves with admiration for you."

Sukhi was very downcast, more so because during the dog fight she overheard one steward putting the blame on her.

"She's the cause of all this! We should not have let her stay here. A female dog means trouble and more pups. Shall we drive her away?"

Fortunately for her, the chief monk did not let them drive her away. "True, a female dog means pups, but we must not be unkind and add to her misfortune of being a female. Let her be. Kalu will see that no stray dogs come in. Besides, she is very docile and well behaved. We should not harm a harmless animal."

"Let us hope she will be born a male dog in her next

birth," the steward said. Sukhi's ears burned when she heard these words but Kapuri only chuckled. "These men!" she whispered to Sukhi. "They think no end of themselves, don't they? They think they are the cat's whiskers, but see how Sudu manipulates Kalu!"

"Still it is a man's world, isn't that so?" Sukhi replied.

"It is neither a man's nor a woman's world. What matters is how we live according to the Dhamma. That is the Buddha's teaching."

"But I have suffered much as a result of a being a female," Sukhi reflected.

"Have you?" Kapuri turned a sympathetic ear toward her.

"To begin with, I was a very sickly pup. Apparently, I had a diarrhoea which would not stop. My mother thought I was destined to die and so discarded me."

"But she would have done that even if you were a male," Kapuri pointed out.

"Well, anyway, a kind woman saw me in a ditch, still alive, and took me into her house and nursed me with loving care till I became strong again. But then her husband drove me away. He drove me away because I was a female."

“Oh dear! What we women have to go through, eh? So, then what happened?”

“I had to eke out a miserable existence on the road. The kind woman used to come and give me a little food but I was lucky if I could eat it by myself. You know what it is like to live among stray dogs on the streets. I got used to leading a very marginalised life, slinking into temples quietly and when driven out, going to another.”

“So that’s how you took to meditating and leading a religious life?” the tortoise asked. He had sidled up to them while they were talking and was quietly listening to their conversation.

“Yes.”

“And you never had pups?”

“Yes, I did. My husband was the leader of a pack and he was very kind to me, but one day he was picked up by the municipal van and taken to the dog pound with some others. We all bolted when we saw the van driving up and the municipal labourers jumping out to catch us. We ran for dear life, but my husband was nearest the van and they caught him, my pups, and some other dogs. When I think of my loss there is a great pain in my chest.”

“And so you finally came here?”

“Yes, someone told me of this quiet, out of the way temple. It is really a haven for the likes of me.”

“My dear, this temple and our religious path is for everyone, not only for the likes of you. Our path brings peace and tranquillity to everyone.”

“Well then, especially for those like myself who have had to lead such miserable unfortunate lives. You see, though I have lived on the streets all my life, I am a very sensitive creature.”

“I am not impressed by sensitive creatures,” Kapuri said, wrinkling her trunk, “unless they are sensitive to the feelings and sufferings of others too. Very often, being sensitive means nothing more than having a heightened notion of an ego.”

“It is very difficult to get rid of the sense of ego,” Sukhi murmured. “How can one do it?”

The tortoise came closer to Sukhi in order to advise her:

“Go on purifying your mind—go on observing and monitoring your thoughts, analysing your motives. Watch yourself when you are hurt. Self-knowledge and understanding oneself helps. We must always remember that there is nothing permanent within us. We are a mere process, a flow of passing physical and mental phenomena, emotions, concepts, ideas,

memories... we must not try to attach an 'I' or an agent to all that. Sometimes, the mind reacts with craving and excessive attachment to people and things. Sometimes it flits from one kind of sense pleasure to another in a whirl, bent only on gratifying the senses, and when not gratified flitting somewhere else. These are the forces and tendencies which keep us in saṃsāra, clinging to sense desires and the ego-notion. Each time you experience the emotion of hurt, become aware of the ego-notion receiving a shock, as it were. Focus your mind on that sensation. Ask yourself why you are reacting in that way.

“Self-examination is like a drop of water on a rock doing its work of eroding it little by little. That is why awareness and mindfulness are emphasised so much on the path to liberation from the 'self'—this dukkha-fraught, dukkha-causing selfhood. You see, when you suspect that you are being short-changed or bypassed, or when someone makes a derogatory remark about you, the reaction is predictable. You react with anger. Some people are very sensitive to such assaults on the ego, but there is nothing very great about being hyper-sensitive.”

“But surely one must have some self-respect.”

“Of course, but the best kind of self-respect comes from an awareness that one is practising the Dhamma,

not practising one-upmanship. Practising the Dhamma gives one a considerable amount of poise and stability. But, of course, I don't mean a feeling of self-righteousness. You must realise that you are never perfect till the end of the path is reached. If you go about always ready to react every time someone makes a hurtful remark and you flare up in anger, it is like physically running a hundred miles away. Then if, from your stand a hundred miles away, again something is said or done or not said or done, to which you take umbrage, it is like running another hundred miles. Or you may re-trace your previous mileage through motives of attachment and clinging. Are you not then ridiculous, flying back and forth, with aversion one moment and attachment the next?"

"So, how can one stop this flying back and forth?"

"By the practice of mindfulness and concentration. It steadies the mind and enables one to think calmly and clearly. Have you not heard the following stanza?"

"He whose mind does not flutter
By contact with worldly contingencies,
Sorrowless, stainless, and secure:
This is the highest blessing."

"But why does one get hurt in the first place?"

"I see you have not understood. Let me put it this

way: we grasp these changing physical and mental phenomena we call 'I' so firmly that we make ourselves believe we are a permanent entity. If someone exposes some fault in us, our first reaction is to deny it or to defend ourselves—all because of this attachment to the mental construct we have of ourselves. If we do not cling so much and maintain our objectivity, we can face changes very much more calmly and rationally. It is the same with the views and beliefs we hold. We must not have a passionate hold on anything. That is, if you are really bent on renunciation.”

“What about the view that we are a mere process? Are we not holding on to that belief?”

“Don't hold on to it. Experience the truth of it by observing the nature of this changing phenomena we call an 'I' and a 'me.' That awareness will loosen the grasping of the aggregates, the notion of an abiding ego-entity.”

Sukhi practised purifying her mind very diligently according to the way Kapuri and the tortoise had instructed her. Soon it became apparent to all that Sukhi was making good progress. Her progress in meditation and her kindness to others drew many to her. Since the canine species were vehemently denied access to the temple premises by Kalu, other species

like birds and squirrels began to come to Sukhi for meditation guidance and solace. But unfortunately as time went on she became so engrossed in focusing attention on the problems of others and their defilements, that she neglected to continue the practice of monitoring and purifying her own thoughts. Gradually there began a slow change in her personality.

Sudu was the first to notice this change in Sukhi and would openly comment on Sukhi's increasing smugness bordering on arrogance. Sudu's blatant derision influenced Kalu to snarl and growl at Sukhi even more than usual whenever he happened to pass her by. Once Kalu came deliberately up to her, snarled in a most insinuating manner, and snatched away a bone that was near her paw. Sukhi did not remonstrate but turned and looked up at Kapuri who was standing near the crenelated wall that surrounded the Bo tree, munching on some branches at her feet.

"Did you see what he did?" she inquired of Kapuri.

"Yes, I did."

"Why are people so envious and jealous of me?"

"Are they?" Kapuri smiled.

"Didn't you see what Kalu did?"

“Yes, but was he motivated by envy and jealousy?”

“Then?”

“My dear, you know the Dhamma as well as I do. Are you still observing your own motives and thoughts with the same intensity as you used to?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Well, we all have varying degrees of defilements—don’t we?—all stemming from *asmi-māna*, pride of the self. Am I not right?”

“Yes, but what are you driving at?”

“We must constantly keep ourselves under observation—not only others. In fact, let others be our mirror wherein we may discover our own defilements.”

Sukhi bent her head and began to quietly bite through the short fur on her paws with the rapid short clipping motion of a barber’s razor. There were no ticks on her body but she felt ashamed and wanted to hide her face. Kapuri turned away with great delicacy of feeling.

Some days later, Sukhi heard that the pup with the black patch over one eye had fallen ill again. Kapuri told her that the chief monk had instructed a steward to take the pup to a veterinarian in town. Later, he was

brought back after the necessary injections and drips had been given him. Sukhi lost no time in paying a visit to Sudu and her pups.

“I was very sad to hear about your pup. How is he?” she asked.

“Better,” was the cold rejoinder.

“He used to come and meditate at the Bo tree with me,” Sukhi said.

Sudu stiffened. “He doesn’t like you,” she snapped. “He likes Kapuri. He adores her.”

Sukhi couldn’t believe her ears. Sudu’s rudeness cut through her like a knife. For a moment she puzzled over what Sudu had said and then quietly got up. “Well,” she said, “I shall get along now. I hope the pup will be better soon.”

When she went to her usual place under the Bo tree, she found Kapuri by the wall.

“Sudu says the pup loves you very much,” Sukhi said, the tears welling in her eyes. “I’ll never forget how he used to dart away from the others and come prancing out here to exchange a few words with me.”

“You still haven’t learnt to let go, have you?” Kapuri mumbled, shaking her head dolefully. Sukhi looked up startled.

“It is ‘I’ and ‘me’ and ‘mine’ all over again, isn’t it? How much the little fellow likes you or how much he likes someone else more or how much you feel his absence....”

Sukhi broke down. “Do tell me how I can get rid of this attachment to myself?” she said, weeping. “It makes me suffer so.”

“Examine yourself with self-searching honesty, constantly. Meditation will help. Then only can you let go of the entire grasping of these five aggregates called a ‘being’!”

“I couldn’t bear to see the pup so ill. He was such a lively bundle of fur, prancing and tumbling about with the others. They are all such a joy to see.”

“You are letting your notion of an ego come into your concern for the pups, aren’t you?”

“Notion of an ego? Aren’t you being unfair?”

“The ego-notion is a dangerous thing,” Kapuri continued in a tone of mild reproof. “It works in a very subtle way, infiltrating all our thoughts and actions. Sometimes, almost unknown to oneself, tentacles are put out for the purpose of clinging to living beings or things—clinging to ‘I’ and ‘me’ and ‘mine.’ Try to intercept that clinging.”

“How?”

“By being conscientiously and consistently mindful, by examining your thoughts and actions with ruthless honesty.”

Sukhi sat down and a mood of deep shame overcame her. Presently, she emerged from her mood of shame and self-censure and became absorbed in the intense peace and cleanliness of the precincts. There were some avocado trees and other fruit trees and flowering trees in the well-swept premises of the temple. They surrounded the Bo tree like disciples round a teacher. The Bo tree was decorated with multi-coloured flags. The disciple trees seemed to be posturing in various statuesque attitudes, holding up their luxuriant crowns, some decked with fruit. They were silent but still expressive of peace and fulfilment and reverence. The cooing of doves and pigeons and the chirping of birds and crickets, not to mention the raucous cawing of crows, caught Sukhi’s ears from varying distances. Hearing the sounds of the birds and smelling the scents of the temple flowers, she began to delve deeper and deeper, seeking the peace that comes when the mind turns within, the wisdom that arises through realising the egoless nature of all things.

Table of Contents

Title page	2
The Struggle of Letting Go	4