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Beneficial Letting Go in Suffering

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Introduction

This paper examines the question of what needs to be “let go of” in suffering in order to gain or benefit from it.

For the purpose of this paper, the term “suffering” will be understood in a three-fold manner: *physical* suffering, *psychological* suffering, and *spiritual* suffering¹ which is somewhat limiting because of their interconnectedness. In a longer paper, the complexity of suffering would demand a wider range of categories than physical (“suffering an illness”), psychological (“suffering as grief”), and spiritual (“suffering as the fear of finitude”)² suffering.

Specifically, two stances that need to be relinquished or surrendered (“let go of”) in each of these three categories of suffering will be attempted in this brief examination.

Physical Suffering

Physical Habits.

From the perspective of suffering physically, a starting point may be the need to leave (“let go of”) certain habits in order to gain back a greater measure of one’s health and vigour. Perhaps compromising on dietary practices, and/or neglecting moderate exercise, and/or depriving oneself of sleep have become patterns of behaviour that need to be examined and changed. However, Cook realistically notes that “it’s hard to break habits, especially when

¹ Richard Hauser, *Finding God in Troubled Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 86.

² Helen K. Black, “Elders’ Narratives of Suffering,” in *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion: A Handbook*, vol. 2, ed. Melvin A. Kimble and Susan H. McFadden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 268.

they get tangled up with emotional needs”.³ With physical suffering, discernible causes need to be relinquished if “we want to come closer to God and gain the rich blessing of spiritual peace”.⁴ In sum, the care and maintaining of the body – the temple of the Spirit – is a path to physical and spiritual well-being⁵ which are great gains in contrast to suffering discomfort and pain through neglect of the body.

Attachment to the Physical World

In addition, physical suffering can result from excessive attachment to the powerful motivators of popularity, prestige, power, and influence in the Western world.⁶ These motivators are “deep and painful to break off”.⁷ Consequently, for example, a breadwinner is compelled to work exhausting hours, often with the spouse also employed, to keep abreast with debt payments. Family relationships are inevitably strained with further concomitant physical distress and suffering.

The apostle Paul’s words – “do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world” (Rom 12:2)⁸ – are instructive in relation to turning away from (“letting go of”) attachment to “unrealistic images of power and control”⁹ in our society and their accompanying suffering.

³ Marshall Cook, *How to Handle Worry: A Catholic Approach* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1999), 80.

⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁵ Ibid. Cook lists “ten moderate, common sense guidelines on diet and exercise” (pages 78-79): (1) eat a diet rich in fresh fruits, veggies and whole grains; (2) cut down on fat and sugar; (3) eliminate nicotine, and cut down on or eliminate caffeine and alcohol; (4) eat small portions several times a day rather than one or two large meals; (5) have your biggest meal when you get up and taper off until bedtime; (6) don’t eat anything substantial within two hours of bedtime; (7) find moderate forms of exercise that tone rather than tear down; (8) exercise regularly, at least five days a week if possible; (9) exercise at about the same time every day; and (10) don’t exercise within two hours of bedtime.

⁶ Charles Meyer, *Surviving Death: A Practical Guide to Caring for the Dying and Bereaved* (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988), 75.

⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁸ *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1985), 1725.

⁹ Meyer, *Surviving Death*, 76.

By contrast to suffering tension, anxiety, and stress from attachment, one has much to gain from “developing a daily spiritual life”¹⁰ with its resultant peace, joy, and tranquillity.

In letting go of excessive attachment to our existence and the people surrounding us there is also gain through a stance of *non-attachment*. Rather than “fearing leaving this world”¹¹ and being “angry at leaving these pleasures”,¹² with the accompanying physical distress, non-attachment brings a degree of freedom and gratitude through a realization that:

We should be grateful to the Lord, to Providence, for whatever we have. All the things of the world are meant for us and we have the right to use them. However, they are not ours, so we should not possess them. We have no right to establish ownership over the things we have, because they have been given to us to use, but they are not ours. We should use them as means, but we should not possess anything . . . Learn to love all the things of the world, just as means but don’t get attached to them. This is the secret—the philosophy of non-attachment.¹³

Psychological Suffering

Anguish: Hunger and Emptiness

One form of psychological suffering is to experience an emptiness and hunger in life – a type of existential *angst*, in part characterized by loss of vision and hope. This may result in “responding to life with hesitancy, resentment, envy, anger, and defensiveness”,¹⁴ each of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 75.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Swami Rama, *Karma and Non-Attachment* [article on-line], accessed 4 October 2009; available from <http://sites.google.com/site/swamiramateachings/swami-rama-karma-nonattachment>; Internet. See also Swami Rama, *Sacred Journey: Living Purposefully and Dying Gracefully* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press, 2002). Charles Meyer in *Surviving Death* (page 75) writes along similar lines in that God has provided much for us to enjoy and appreciate: “We are also told the world is not a forbidden or foreboding place, that there are pleasures abounding here and we are to enjoy them as much as possible, smelling the flowers along the way, loving and being loved, hugging, being sexual, sensual, sensitive and caring, wallowing in the simple luxuries God has provided for us in this world.”

¹⁴ John J. Shea, *Finding God Again: Spirituality for Adults* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 146.

which brings further related suffering with it. These less than satisfactory human responses need to be abandoned (“let go of”) through the support of friends, or family members, or mentors, or co-workers, or a counsellor or psychotherapist¹⁵ – all who can help restore hope and vision. As a consequence of honest and caring relationships, gained will be love, nurture, respect, and affirmation.¹⁶

The Self

Other prevalent forms of psychological suffering include grief (refusal to let go of a loved possession), apathy (withdrawal from life), lust (greed), and envy/jealousy (sadness at another’s good).¹⁷ Keating states that these are indicative of the false self in action.¹⁸ He defines the false self as “the self developed in our own likeness rather than in the likeness of God; the self-image developed to cope with the emotional trauma of early childhood, which seeks happiness in satisfying the instinctual needs of survival/security, affection/esteem, and power/control, and which bases its self-worth on cultural or group identification”.¹⁹ In the process of suffering, this false self needs to be abandoned (“let go of”) in order to gain the True Self, which Keating describes as “the image of God in which every human being is created; our participation in the divine life manifested in our uniqueness”.²⁰

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 145-146.

¹⁷ Thomas Keating, *Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life: Open Mind, Open Heart; Invitation to Love; The Mystery of Christ* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 243. Keating also mentions pride and anger.

¹⁸ Ibid., 343.

¹⁹ Ibid., 124.

²⁰ Ibid., 250.

Spiritual Suffering

Concepts about God.

In spiritual suffering, when God feels “far off, absent, silent, beyond [our] reach”,²¹ and a person experiences the “pain of a heart groping for God but unable to make contact”,²² they are possibly being called to surrender their own image of God. In this context, Meyer writes that “if we are to find God we must let go of him/her/it or however we see and use God”.²³ Incomplete and unrealistic views of God, exacerbated in suffering, include “God as always in control . . . God as made in the image of our father or mother . . . or God as the anthropomorphic image of ourselves”.²⁴ Additionally, as Shea writes, God may only be known as “the Supreme Being, the God of Law, the God of Belief, the God of Dependency and Control, and the God of the Group”.²⁵ In the shedding (“letting go of”) such inadequate concepts of God, one draws closer to the true and living God – God as Thou or the Spiritual Presence/Reality, the God of Love, the God of Freedom, and the God of Community.²⁶

The God of Mystery

The living God is also a God of mystery. In coming to understand and appreciate this truth, the logic of objective knowing (rationalism) or fantasy images of God (including forms of anthropomorphism) must be surrendered (“let go of”).²⁷ In acknowledging the God of mystery, one also begins to leave a number of other insufficient concepts, and as a result richly gains in one’s religious experience, as shown in Table 1 below:

²¹ Maxie Dunnam, *The Workbook on Coping as a Christian* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1993), 50.

²² Ibid.

²³ Meyer, *Surviving Death*, 76.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ John J. Shea, *Finding God Again*, 151.

²⁶ Ibid., 150.

²⁷ Ibid., 155, 159.

Table 1. Toward Appreciating the God of Mystery

Concepts “Let Go Of” . . .	Appreciation Gained For . . .
1. Conventionality	A new depth experienced in knowing God.
2. Beliefs expressed in verbal formulations	Rituals that are able to touch the body-self in its feeling and cognitive depth.
3. Literal thinking	Metaphorical thinking is valued.
4. Reality lives in dichotomies	Reality dwells in paradox.
5. Propositional truth	Meaning is understood behind propositional truth.
6. Authoritarianism	Being able to share openly with one another, the voice of the living God is heard.
7. Rationalism	A respect for mystery fostered, resulting in nurturing and a depth of religious experience. Through surrendering control and the welcoming of hope and forgiveness, the reality of God is discovered.

Source: John J. Shea, *Finding God Again: Spirituality for Adults* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 159.

Conclusion

In suffering, then, one needs to willingly relinquish (“let go of”) a number of deficient stances in order to gain a richer spiritual experience. These are summarized in Table 2 as follows:

Table 2. Beneficial Letting Go in Suffering

In suffering, one needs to:	
“Let go of . . .” (characterized by fear)	“In order to gain . . .” (characterized by love)
Poor health habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Renewed health and vigour ▪ Drawing closer to God ▪ Spiritual peace
Excessive attachment to this world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Peace and joy ▪ Tranquility ▪ Freedom and gratitude
Anguish – hunger and emptiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Honest and caring relationships ▪ Love and nurture ▪ Respect and affirmation
False self – developed in one’s own likeness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ True Self – the image of God in which every human is created ▪ The self developed in the likeness of God ▪ One’s participation in the divine life
Misconcepts about God	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ God as Thou or the Spiritual Presence/Reality ▪ God of Love and Freedom ▪ God of Community
Devaluing the God of mystery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Appreciating the God of mystery ▪ Depth of feeling and meaning; nurturing of religious experience ▪ Discovering the reality of God

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APPENDIX

Personal Reflections on Suffering

Paradoxically, while suffering is unpleasant, we may be contributing to it in a number of ways, such as:

1. Consenting to poor physical habits.
2. Becoming attached to realms such as possessions, position, and power.
3. Yielding to the anguish of purposelessness through loss of hope.
4. Being driven by the false self (ego).
5. Adhering to misconcepts about God
6. Devaluing and not appreciating the God of Mystery

However, since we have contributed to our suffering, we can and need to let go of those ways in which we are bringing suffering upon ourselves – and thereby reach a higher level of living in the Spirit, which is great gain.

While suffering may be categorized in a three-fold manner – namely, physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering – I would like to suggest that because of the close body-mind connection, these three dimensions are inter-related. While physical suffering is a reality, such as in a physical illness, much of our suffering also exists in the mind, and is therefore psychological.

The suffering in our mind (or psychological suffering) results from *mental distortions* such as the following:

- Irrational beliefs
- Unsound expectations
- Unreasonable demands
- Erroneous perceptions
- Unmerited assumptions
- Invalid needs

These mental distortions can, and often do, result in concomitant physiological suffering (again, because of the mind-body connection). To illustrate, we can be angry with someone based on irrational beliefs; this anger may in turn translate into an upset stomach. The mental distortions operate horizontally in relation to others, and vertically in relation to the Godhead. For example, we can have erroneous perceptions about our neighbour as well as about God.

In order to gain from suffering, these distorted mindsets need to be identified and “let go of”. The *process* of letting go, and therefore also healing the accompanying suffering, involves internal cognitive questioning. For example, where there is anxiety and fear, one may ask “What is it that I am deeply afraid of?” Where there is sadness and loss, one may ask “What is it that I have lost?” In place of mental distortions, new mindsets will arise:

- Rational beliefs
- Sound expectations
- Reasonable demands
- Correct perceptions
- Rightful assumptions
- Valid needs

These new mindsets will yield great gain as far being freer of physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering. In the place of suffering will emerge a new sense of well-being based on wholesome qualities which can now more readily arise from within such as loving-kindness, compassion, wisdom, and patience.