Letting go : A Practical Path to Peace of Mind
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The sources of suffering

"Suffering" as used here is the mental and/or emotional dissatisfaction that arises when we want reality to be different from what it is.

Suffering arises from many things, such as desire and fear. Desire wants what is absent, while fear is afraid of losing what we already have : pleasure, good health, success, recognition, companionship, security, money, love, etc. We also desire to get rid of what we dislike, and we fear gaining what we do not want : uncertainty, loneliness, failure, diseases, physical disorders, chronic pain, unpleasant obligations, poverty, rejection, humiliation, grief, danger, loss of control, etc. In this way, the mind is often divided between grasping and rejecting. It says, "I must get this," "I must keep this," "I must get rid of that," and "I must prevent that from happening." These reactions are understandable, but when they dominate the mind, they make happiness dependent on the conditions in our life lining up exactly as we want them to.

Loss is another cause of suffering when what is lost is a source of joy, meaning, or identity. This does not mean love or joy are mistakes, it means realizing that anything we love may become a source of suffering, because all things change, leave, or can be taken away. The same connection that makes something precious also makes its absence painful. You must understand that everything in your life that brings you joy will eventually leave. So, when something joyful happens, embrace it fully but do not cling to the thing that caused it.

Expectations create suffering when reality does not match the result we had expected. For example, we expect people to behave a certain way, life to unfold according to our plans, our efforts to produce successful results, or the future to resemble what we imagine. But when people don't act as anticipated, we fail at an endeavor, or the future isn't what we hoped, we feel disappointed.

Taken together, these sources of suffering show a common pattern : **much suffering is caused by comparing what is to what could be**. A happier life does not require pretending that desire, fear, loss, etc. are unreal. It requires seeing clearly how the mind creates suffering by demanding that reality conform to our expectations.

Assumptions are also a source of suffering. When we know what happened, but then guess why it happened and begin treating that guess as though it were a fact, we can end up with conclusions which can cause suffering. For example : you invite a friend to do something, and they say they are busy. You decide, "They don't like me as much anymore", assume that is the reality of the situation, and feel hurt. In general, **confusing our interpretation of reality with reality itself can be a major source of needless suffering**.

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Letting go

Ending suffering involves learning to let go of the reactions of the mind to what has happened, to what might yet happen, and to what could have happened but didn't. This does not mean denying pain, saying that doing harm is acceptable, or refusing to plan for the future. It means seeing clearly when the mind is continuing to suffer over something that is no longer present, not yet present, or may never become present.

Letting go of what has happened

Anger/Resentment often keeps the past alive. It may come from deep wounds, such as how someone was abused as a child by their family, or from small daily irritations, such as being cut off in traffic. Anger can

remain inside you long after the event is over, turning into resentment. If a person cannot forgive how others treated them, the ongoing suffering is not being inflicted on those people; it is being self-inflicted by the one who continues to carry the anger. This does not mean injustice should be excused, denied, or forgotten. It means that continued anger often injures the person who holds it. Forgiveness, in this case, is the decision to stop letting the past control the present.

Guilt over a past event can keep past suffering alive in the present. The best response is to apologize and, where possible, repair the harm that was done. If apology or repair is no longer possible, the work becomes forgiveness of oneself. This can be difficult because guilt often feels morally necessary, as if continuing to suffer proves that we are truly sorry. But endless self-punishment does not undo the original harm. The important questions are : Are you truly sorry? Have you learned from what happened? If someone had done the same thing to you and sincerely regretted it, could you forgive them? And knowing the person you harmed, is it possible they might have forgiven you, or at least would not have wanted you to remain trapped forever in guilt? Self-forgiveness is not evading responsibility, it means accepting responsibility without turning one mistake into a permanent part of your identity.

Shame often turns an event into a self-identity : "I made a mistake" becomes "my reputation is ruined." Unlike guilt which says "I did something bad", shame says "I <u>am</u> bad." You suffer when your mind adopts other people's judgments and says "Because they see me this way, this is what I am." Shame over past events also contains fear : fear of rejection, humiliation, or exclusion in the present. The answer is to recognize that the judgments exist and examine them. Learn from what is true in them, make amends as needed, and then forgive yourself rather than turning the judgments into a permanent image about who you are.

Sorrow also binds the mind to what has happened. When something or someone important leaves us, sorrow is natural because we have become attached to it/them. The answer is not to deny or suppress grief, or rush past it. A healthier response is to experience the sorrow fully, allowing the reality of the loss to be felt, and then gradually release the desire that life return to what it had been. Letting go of loss does not mean ceasing to love what was lost. It means allowing inner peace to return by realizing the past cannot be changed.

<u>Letting go of what might happen</u>

Anxiety is suffering about the future. The future is genuinely unknown; many things could happen, both painful and good. Anxiety turns that uncertainty into a threat and then reacts as though the feared event will definitely arrive. Letting go of anxiety does not mean refusing to plan ahead. Planning is practical; worry is repetitive mental suffering over possibilities that may never manifest. Planning asks, "What can be done to be prepared?" Anxiety circles around "What if this happens?" without resolving anything. A calm mind recognizes the existence of uncertainty without becoming obsessed by imagined outcomes.

<u>Letting go of what could have been</u>

Regret is the mind's attachment to an alternate past : "If only I had chosen differently," "If only that opportunity had worked out," "If only life had gone another way." Reflection can be useful if it teaches you something. But repeated dwelling on what could have been becomes pointless when it prevents you from dealing with what is happening right in front of you. Letting go of regret allows you to fully live the life you are actually living right now.

Denial is the mind's rejection of what has happened or what is happening : "I cannot accept this," "This cannot be happening," etc. Suffering is then caused by the inner distress that a desired event is not happening, or that an undesired event is. This is especially applicable to problems with the body, such as disease, disorders, or chronic

pain. Reducing suffering from denial entails letting go of what we believe "should be" happening and accepting what is actually happening, while still taking whatever practical steps may be possible to improve the situation.

All these ways of letting go lead toward acceptance of what is, thru releasing the mind's attachment to an alternative reality. What happened has happened. What might happen is not yet here. What could have been is not what occurred. Letting go does not mean passivity, approval, or resignation; it means no longer allowing these past, future, or imagined alternatives to keep us mentally avoiding the reality that is actually present.

In order to be able to let go, you must **know that <u>you always have the choice</u> to let go**. Peace of mind begins with recognizing that your inner life is not entirely governed by what has happened to you, nor by your reactions to what has happened. You can choose whether to keep feeding anger, guilt, sorrow, anxiety, regret, etc., or whether to stop giving those reactions the power to dominate the present. Letting go does not mean that you force difficult feelings to disappear – it means recognizing that once you see clearly what you are holding on to, you have the ability to stop feeding it. In this sense, letting go is ultimately an exercise of internal authority and power : choosing not to allow the past, the present, the future, other people, or your mind's own habits to determine your state of mind for you.

To understand how letting go becomes possible, we first need to learn <u>how</u> to see clearly what the mind is holding onto. This starts with mindfulness.

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<u>Mindfulness</u>

Mindfulness is the practice of deliberately paying attention to what is happening in the present moment, without immediately judging it, resisting it, or becoming carried away by the thoughts and feelings that arise.
Mindfulness is the practice that allows you to see clearly.

<u>The goals of mindfulness</u>

– Continually bringing your attention to the present. Notice what you see, hear, feel physically, and what emotions or thoughts are present without automatically reacting to them.
– Practicing acceptance toward whatever arises, including your own distractions, judgments, or perceived failures. Observe your mind with kindness and curiosity, not criticism.
– Being able to experience an emotion without immediately acting from it or trying to suppress it.
– Recognize fear, anger, desire, negative thoughts, etc. as real experiences occurring in the mind, but do not treat the conclusions and interpretations they suggest as facts, and then get carried away with them.
Note : while both the brain and the body are involved in creating emotions, I refer to emotions as mental events because I am concerned primarily with their impact on thought processes.
– Being able to notice something without immediately deciding that it is good, bad, desirable, unacceptable, etc.
– Becoming aware of your automatic patterns and reactions, so that you can choose to respond deliberately rather than out of reflex.

<u>How to practice mindfulness</u>

– Use an anchor for attention. Choose something simple and continuously present, such as the breath, bodily sensations, or surrounding sounds. When your attention wanders, gently return to the anchor. This strengthens your ability to direct and sustain attention.
– Recognize when your attention has become caught in the past, future, or an imagined alternative, then return to what is happening right now, without chastising yourself for letting your mind wander.

– Learn to experience thoughts and feelings without identifying with them. Instead of telling yourself “I am anxious”, phrase it as “I am noticing a feeling of anxiety”. This helps you recognize negative thoughts and emotions as experiences occurring in the mind rather than as part of your identity, and helps avoid automatically treating what they seem to imply about reality as fact, so that you may look at them more objectively.
– Don’t immediately interpret what you notice. First allow the feeling or thought to be fully experienced as it is, without adding judgments such as “I shouldn't feel this” or turning it into an explanation or story.
– Several times a day, for 5 or 10 minutes, or even 10 to 20 seconds, deliberately notice what is actually here : what you see, hear, feel physically, and what emotions and thoughts are present. This develops the ability to remain with immediate experience rather than becoming absorbed in thoughts and feelings about the past or future. You can also do this while walking, eating, washing dishes, or listening to someone talk.
– When caught up in intense emotions, draw your attention to your physical body. Notice the tightness in your chest, the heat in your face, the clenching of your jaw, the knot in your stomach, or other bodily sensations, and experience them as physical sensations rather than as problems that must be changed.

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Seeing Clearly

Mindfulness trains the mind to remain present in the moment and observe thoughts, feelings, and experiences without automatically reacting to them. Seeing clearly uses that awareness to recognize the difference between what is actually present and what the mind is adding through interpretation, assumption, fear, desire, etc.

“Letting go” cannot be forced by willpower alone. We do not release anger, fear, guilt, or regret simply by commanding ourselves to stop feeling them. Before the mind can let go of these things, it must understand what it is clinging to, why it is clinging, and that it is only a story that the mind keeps repeating. We cannot let go of what we do not realize we are holding. This is where the idea of seeing clearly becomes essential. Seeing clearly is to *directly recognize* what is happening in the mind : anger arising, fear imagining the future, guilt repeating the past, regret inventing an alternate life, denial refusing to accept what is already true, etc.

Seeing clearly involves meeting reality directly, before the mind reshapes it into a story. When awareness is focused on direct experience – what is actually seen, heard, felt, known, and happening right now – we are seeing clearly. When the mind adds labels or assumptions, we have moved into speculation. Speculation is not necessarily wrong, but it is uncertain. It is the mind’s attempt to establish the truth of the situation : “this must mean what I’m *interpreting* it to mean.” Seeing clearly is more immediate – it simply recognizes what is actually known. For example, you notice that your partner seems unusually quiet. Speculation says, “They must be angry with me.” Seeing clearly only says what is directly known : “They are quieter than normal today.” Seeing clearly does not require eliminating interpretations; it allows you to *recognize them as interpretations rather than confusing them with facts*.

Seeing things clearly as they are is to encounter reality without forcing it to match what we wish, fear, believe, or imagine. The mind carries an inner map of expectations, beliefs, and assumptions about ourselves, other people, and how life should unfold. Without realizing it, we may interpret what happens through that map, emphasizing what confirms it and overlooking what does not. Seeing clearly helps us recognize when this is happening and return our attention to what is actually present. Reality is what is actually present; the problem is that we cover it with interpretations and assumptions. Seeing clearly is to be fully engaged with this moment without unnecessary mental additions. It is not cold detachment, but clear contact with what really is. Seeing clearly relies on direct perception and actual experience.

How to practice seeing clearly

– Pause before interpreting what you experience. When something happens, especially something surprising or emotionally charged, give yourself a moment to simply notice what you saw, heard, felt, or thought before putting it into words. The goal is to become more familiar with direct experience itself before turning that experience into a description, interpretation, or story.

– When something happens, ask yourself, "What do I actually know, and what am I adding to it?" Notice when direct observation begins to turn into assumptions, inferences, or explanations supplied by the mind, *and keep clear the distinction between the two*.

– Choose an ordinary object, person, or situation and notice only what is directly observable, temporarily avoiding judgments such as good, bad, pleasant, beautiful, annoying, rude, etc. This trains the mind in the distinction between what is actually present and the mind's evaluation of it.

How seeing clearly removes suffering.

Seeing clearly can bring mental suffering to an end because it allows us to recognize reality as it is instead of getting lost in what we think, fear, or wish is happening. When we see our anger, anxiety, guilt, regret, etc. for what they are, we may not be able to stop them from initially appearing, but we can choose to stop feeding them with the same thoughts over and over. We begin to see when we are holding on to the past, fighting against the present, or worrying about a future that has not happened. Seeing this clearly allows us to choose to *let go* of the thoughts, attachments, and resistance that keep our suffering alive.

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Conclusion

The goal of this paper is to understand that much suffering comes from comparing what is to what could be, or from confusing reality with what the mind adds to it. This can result in holding on to what is gone, fearing what has not yet happened, wishing circumstances were different, or becoming trapped in interpretations of what events mean.

Seeing clearly allows us to distinguish what is real from what the mind is adding to it, while also revealing the mental processes of attachment, resistance, expectation, assumption, and rumination that sustain anger, guilt, shame, sorrow, anxiety, regret, denial, etc.

Seeing clearly allows you to step back from your immediate thoughts and feelings, recognizing them as real experiences without automatically treating their interpretation of reality as fact. It makes letting go possible by bringing an automatic, habitual mental process into conscious awareness, where you can recognize it and choose not to continue sustaining it.

The result is not a life without pain, disappointment, uncertainty, or loss, but a mind that is more capable of avoiding turning those experiences into continued suffering. Releasing suffering in this way promotes peace of mind by no longer requiring reality to change before we can accept and be at peace with it.

Appendix

I believe this is the shortest description I've ever seen of how to be happy :

Let go of what has happened
Let go of what will happen
Let go of what could be
Let go of likes and dislikes
Attend fully to the present moment
And let go of it as well

Disclaimer : I started with a list of about 45 mostly single-sentence bullet points containing all the things I wanted to say in this document, and I came up with them completely on my own. I put them into ChatGPT and asked it to create a paragraph for each point. I then spent many, many hours editing its output, deleting lines, modifying lines, rearranging lines, and adding new lines of my own. If you wish to consider this to have been "created by an AI", you can, but as far as I'm concerned, it's my creation because every single individual idea came from my mind. And the "poem" above about how to be happy was entirely written by me.