

University of Pretoria etd – Fourtounas, D (2003)

**THE EXPERIENCE OF LETTING GO:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY**

by

**DEONESEA FOURTOUNAS**

*Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree*

**PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR**  
(Psychotherapy)

*in the*

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Department of Psychology

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

SUPERVISOR: Dr M Aronstam

October 2003

***The Secret***

*No, it is not enough to despise  
the world*

*It is not enough to live one's life  
as though*

*Riches and power were nothings.  
They are not*

*But to grasp the world, to grasp  
and feel it grow*

**Great in one's grasp is likewise  
not enough**

*The secret is to grasp it, and let it  
go*

Wang Wei ( 699 AD)

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to acknowledge and thank:

- The Creator, for making me aware of my presence in the process of creation. I have been deeply humbled by the experience.
- Dr. Maurice Aronstam for serving as supervisor, and for his faith in me.
- Friend, colleague and mentor, Prof. Rex Van Vuuren, for the meaningful discussions that revealed the horizons beyond.
- My family who supported me, not only in words but in actions. For their love, encouragement and help, I am deeply grateful.
- My parents for the privilege of being their daughter.
- My colleagues and friends who understood where I was in the process.
- Dr. Gregory Graham-Smith, for his fine editing.

**The experience of letting go: A phenomenological study.**

by

**Deonesea Fourtounas**

Promoter : Dr M Aronstam  
Department : Psychology, University of Pretoria  
Degree : Ph D (Psychotherapy)

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to discover and describe the structure and essence of the phenomenon of letting go. The meaning of the experience had to be revealed, explored and understood. The emphasis in contemporary psychology is on separation, a word often used synonymously with letting go, and, while a plethora of studies have been conducted in the area of separation, with separation-individuation the prevailing paradigm for developmental psychology, the meaning and experience of letting go has remained unexplored.

The phenomenon of letting go was approached from a developmental perspective. Literature in the field regarding separation, separation-individuation and the related aspects of holding, attachment, transitional space and autonomy was reviewed. With the focus on an existential-phenomenological understanding of the lived meaning of the experience, a dialogue between the available psychological facts and the world of experience regarding letting go arises.

The phenomenon was explored in a qualitative manner employing the phenomenological research method articulated by Amedeo Giorgi. The qualitative research interview, proposed by Kvale, was the method used to collect the data where, five participants were asked to describe a significant letting-go experience.

The general psychological structure revealed that the experience of letting go cannot be contained in stasis. The experience is also relative to the contextual environment in which it occurs. Letting go is a transitional process of spiral mobility, as the past is returned to (and repeated), to meet with the challenge of change. In fear of entering the unknown, the familiar is held on to and as a façade evolves which conceals the truth, there is a deceptive belief regarding personal stability. In the push and pull experience of the polarised conflict, a struggle ensues, where unexpected outbursts can occur. Gradual awareness of the inevitability of change and the emerging negativity regarding the self gives rise to the threat of fragmentation, and there is a submission to the omnipotence of time and space. In an attempt to gain control, decisions are made, as the self partakes in the creative process. Successful resolution of the conflict gives rise to a sense of empowerment.

While memories fill the gap of the past and new meaning is created regarding the future, a sense of continuity arises that is held on to. To let go is to relinquish control, to submit to, and partake in the process of creation. The vacillation and oscillation between positive and negative forces is the rhythmic process of life. Letting go is characteristic of human development, which though cyclic, is not only phase-related but unpredictable and an integral part of life. The dialectic of holding on and letting go is the dialectic of life and death.

The implications of letting go are diverse in relation to microcosmic or macrocosmic change, whether personal, social, political or universal. The findings revealed can contribute to the fields of developmental psychology, social psychology, transpersonal psychology, psychotherapy, bereavement, forgiveness and other related fields. Letting go is the experience of the self in the process of change.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	
<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	
1.1 Motivation for the Study	1
1.2 Overview of the Study	2
1.3 Aim of the Study	5
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	
<i>LETTING GO</i>	
	<b>6</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	
<i>LITERATURE REVIEW</i>	
	<b>10</b>
3.0 Letting Go: A Human Developmental Perspective	10
3.1 Erikson and Development	11
3.1.1 Erikson and Letting go	13
3.1.2 Control and Letting go	14
3.1.3 Developmental Achievement	15
3.2 Heidegger, Levinas, Mahler and Erikson	16
3.3 Mahler and Separation Individuation	17
3.3.1 Normal Autistic Phase	18

University of Pretoria etd – Fourtounas, D (2003)

3.3.2	Normal Symbiotic Phase	18
3.3.3	Separation Individuation	19
3.4	Other Theorists	25
3.4.1	Infancy and Childhood	25
3.4.2	Adolescence	27
3.4.3	Adulthood and the Later years	27
3.5	Holding	30
3.5.1	Environment and Containment	30
3.5.2	Oneness and Omnipotence	32
3.5.3	Types of Holding	33
3.5.3.1	Symbiotic Holding	33
3.5.3.2	Extended Holding	34
3.5.3.3	Mirroring and Holding	36
3.5.3.4	Metaphorical Holding	39
3.6	Attachment	40
3.6.1	What is Attachment?	41
3.6.2	Attachment and Development	43
3.6.2.1	Infancy and Childhood	43
3.6.2.2	Adolescence	44
3.6.2.3	Adulthood	45
3.6.3	Separation and Separateness	46
3.6.4	Loss	48
3.6.5	Separation Anxiety	50
3.7	Transitional Space	52
3.7.1	Transition	53
3.7.2	Space	53
3.7.2.1	Creation of Space	54

University of Pretoria etd – Fourtounas, D (2003)

3.7.2.2	Space and Differentiation	54
3.7.2.3	Space and Distance	54
3.7.3	Illusion and Disillusion	57
3.7.4	Transitional Object and Transitional Phenomenon	59
3.7.4.1	Transitional object and Separateness	62
3.7.5	The Gap and Illusion	63
3.7.6	Presence in Absence	65
3.8	Autonomy	67
3.8.1	Autonomy and Independence	68
3.8.2	Internalisation, Integration and Individuation	70
3.8.3	Speech and Language	73
3.8.4	Autonomy and Relatedness	75

**CHAPTER FOUR**

*THE STUDY* **81**

4.1	Methodological Orientation	81
4.2	Phenomenological Research	83
4.3	Research Participants	85
4.4	Pilot Study	87
4.5	Interviews	89
4.5.1	Research Interview	89
4.5.2	Follow-up Interview	90
4.5.3	Interview Review	91
4.6	Data Explication and Data Analysis	91
4.6.1	Sense of the Whole	92
4.6.2	Natural Meaning Units	92
4.6.3	Central Themes	93

4.6.4	Situated Constituents	93
4.6.5	Situated Narrative Description	94
4.6.6	General Situated Structure	94
4.6.7	General Psychological Structure	94
4.6.8	Structural Synthesis	95
4.7	Conclusion	95

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **THE INVESTIGATION AND RESULTS**

96

5.1	The Research Question	96
5.2	The Research Participants	96
5.3	Data Analysis	97
	Participant A: Marlene (M)	99
	Participant B: Ben (B)	146
	Participant C: Penny (P)	154
	Participant D: John (J)	163
	Participant E: Karen (K)	175
5.4	General Psychological Structure	183
5.5	Structural Synthesis	205

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### *DISCUSSION* **208**

6.1	Theory and Findings	209
6.2	Implications of Letting go	251

6.3	Letting go and Development	262
-----	----------------------------	-----

	<i>REFERENCE LIST</i>	<i>271</i>
--	-----------------------	------------

*APPENDIX*

*A. Tables I & II*

<i>Research Participant (B)</i>	<i>287</i>
---------------------------------	------------

<i>Research Participant (P)</i>	<i>302</i>
---------------------------------	------------

<i>Research Participant (J)</i>	<i>327</i>
---------------------------------	------------

<i>Research Participant (K)</i>	<i>362</i>
---------------------------------	------------

**B. Interviews (Unedited)**

Research Participant (M)	382
--------------------------	-----

Research Participant (B)	394
--------------------------	-----

Research Participant (P)	400
--------------------------	-----

Research Participant (J)	413
--------------------------	-----

Research Participant (K)	423
--------------------------	-----

*C. Forms*

<i>Form A</i>	<i>Letter to Research Participant</i>	<i>430</i>
---------------	---------------------------------------	------------

Form B	Participant Release Form	431
--------	--------------------------	-----

Form C	Thank You Letter	432
--------	------------------	-----