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## INVESTIGATING THE EXPERIENCE OF 'LETTING GO' IN CREATIVE PROCESS OF DESIGNERS

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The experience of letting go is much spoken about and written by many practicing creative professionals, especially artists and performers. Many claim that their best works happened when they were in a state of letting go. It is an individual experience which is highly personal, unpredictable and random. Though a lot is talked about letting go experience, this topic is still very subjective and treated as personal. It is left to the creative individual to understand and experience this state. Though this state is very optimal for every creative professional, there is no common language that explores this experience. Initial studies showed that even designers have experienced the phenomenon of letting go. This study investigates the experience of letting go in the creative professional designers, their understanding of the topic, its potential significance, and its potential implications.

*Keywords:* Design Theory and Thinking, Peak experience, Flow.

Acts of extraordinary performance are recalled by many individuals as being the most meaningful and transformative ones in their lives. The experience is reported to have been surpassing the usual level of intensity, meaning and richness.

This experience has been systematically studied by the humanistic psychologists since the 1950s. The most influential contributor to the study has been Abraham Maslow(1959). He viewed “Peak Experiences” (Laski, 1962, Maslow, 1962, 1964) as “moments of highest happiness and fulfillment”. Maslow also held that although peak experiences are transitory, their consequences may be enduring.

The second construct from humanistic literature describe this experience as Peak performance. Gayle Privette (Privette, 1983, Privette & Landsman, 1983, Privette, G., Lanier, L. S., Vodanovich, S. J. and Bundrick, C. M., 1996) defined this experience as an episode of superior functioning, “behavior which exceeds typical behavior”

The third construct of this positive human experience is “Flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990) He described flow as a common experiential state which can occur in play and any other activity. Flow is defined as an enjoyment, an intrinsically rewarding experience. Flow ranges from repetitive, automatic behavior (microflow) to very complex behavior (macroflow) which may be accompanied by ecstasy. People seek flow for itself and hence engage in activities which maximize immediate intrinsic rewards to oneself.

Though this experience is felt in many activities like sports, death crisis, Zen, Yoga, religious experiences, death crisis, sexual love, childbirth, it is most conspicuous in arts like music, painting, and performing arts.

Literature of study of artists talks about the theories of aesthetics, creativity and personality. A lot of research is aimed at understanding creativity from aspects like the creative person, process, and product, as also how creativity can be recognized and measured.

A study with artists was done to understand the extraordinary experiences within their works. The study revealed that artists describe these extra ordinary experiences as the state of “letting go”. The artists described the state of letting go as being very personal, random, “ as though one has let go of control over one’s mind and body and some supernatural power is working and directing them to do their work” They reported that these episodes were rare and produced creative outputs which were of higher quality than their usual capacity.

#### *Definition of “letting go”*

The state of “letting go” can be defined as

- ~ An episode of higher consciousness where the subject losses sense of time and space at the same time is extremely alert in terms of perception and feeling,
- ~ being extraordinary in nature,
- ~ have qualities of peak experience and peak performance,
- ~ does not necessarily have qualities of flow.

## **1. THE PROBLEM**

A very initial study showed that even designers have experienced the phenomenon of letting go. A lot of research has happened in the area of design thinking and design processes. However, very few studies are actually focused on understanding the phenomenon of letting go in designers and its significance to their creative process of design which may imply success of the creative product.

The present paper investigates this phenomenon of letting go in designers. The data collected will be adduced with respect to each of the following issues:

1. What is the nature of the phenomenon of letting go in designers?
2. What is the relationship of the experience of letting go to the creative output of designers?
3. What is the relationship of the experience of letting go to the design process of designers?

## **2. METHOD**

The research methodology identified 15 designers to be interviewed. All the subjects were educated in design stream and had a professional experience of more than 5 years. The designers were product and visual designers.

#### *Instrumentation and procedure*

All the 15 designers were interviewed with a semi-structured interview.. The subjects were interviewed one on one and were asked to recall and give a retrospective account of their experience of the phenomenon of “letting go”. The interviews were of average 1 hour which was audio and video recorded. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed for the research issues by the Moustaka’s heuristic method.

## **3. RESULTS**

### **3.1. Issue 1: Understanding the Phenomenon of “letting go”**

The issue 1 of this research study was to understand the phenomenon of letting go in designers. The subjects described the various aspects of the phenomenon as per their experience. It was found that most of the designers had never recounted this experience to anyone before and some of them were thinking about it for the first time when the question was put forward in the interview session. Hence, some of them found it difficult to find the right words to describe their experience. Once the transcriptions were analyzed, the experience could be looked at from 4 different aspects.

1. Frequency
2. Stages of the experience
3. Intensity/ levels of experience
4. Feelings during the experience



**Figure 1.** Frequency of the experience of letting go in designers.

### 3.1.1. Frequency

Most of the designers claimed that they had this phenomenon quite rarely and they could perfectly recall the instances when they'd experienced it. The instances were approximately 5-6 in number per designer. It was noted that there was clarity in the way these instances stood out in the memory of the subject.

Three of the designers could not recall specific instances and said that though they had an experience of deep involvement but they could not recall the letting go phenomenon.

And only 2 designers claimed that they have experienced it very often and they continue to do so very often in their professional life as well as personal.

### 3.1.2. Stages of the experience of letting go

All the subjects described the stages of the experience of letting go and the stages post the experience.

It was noted that all the subjects' descriptions were quite similar. They used different words to describe their experience, but when viewed semantically, one would realize the similarities in their reporting. All the data collated was analyzed for the different stages of the experience.

The designers told that *the initial stage* was to *concentrate* on the design problem. They would choose the right time and make space to get ready for the problem they wanted to resolve.

*The second stage* was of *deep involvement*. They would get deeply involved in the problem and the various aspects of the problem. In this stage they would be thinking about the issue and the various aspects from different perspective. In this stage their personal knowledge and feelings about the problem would also be of importance.

*The third stage* was *struggle*. In this stage, the designer tries to use all his knowledge base and thinking capabilities to find a solution to the problem. He goes to the deep recesses of his mind to arrive at an optimal or highly creative solution.

*The fourth stage* they described as *frustration*. By the time they reached this stage they would be deeply involved in the problem and trying to think of a resolution to it. This period was described as very frustrating as they reach more failures in their attempts to find a solution. The designers described that they did not have the experience of letting go every time they concentrated and were deeply involved into the problem. It was very important as to what the subject did at this crucial stage of struggle and frustration. Many a times the subject got frustrated and decided to give up the effort.

But sometimes, the subject would persist. *The fifth stage* described was *persistence*. The designers described that they felt a compulsion to persist. They did not give up in this instance when otherwise in all other times they would.

The next stage described by the designer is a mystical state, a state where everything is just right. *This sixth stage is the experience of letting go*. Five designers described that they felt that something beyond them had taken control and was telling them what to do. Four designers described it to be a flash, where they could see the entire solution in the form of image. One of them reported that he usually got this flash in a dream in the near awake state. Two subjects claimed that their hands just did it, in case they were drawing or writing, everything just flowed out of their fingers onto the paper. Two of them described that they felt a presence of some force, probably God was looking down at them and guiding them and telling them what to do. And the remaining two did not have any recall of anything like this. They just recall being deeply involved and finding the right solution.

All 13 designers recalled the moment when they realized that experience had started. They recalled with clarity the thought that they were experiencing something beyond them. They all described that the output done during this experience was just right, some described it as everything just fell into place, it was just perfect.

They had a very clear perception of the moment when the experience ended. Post this experience, they described that they felt a deep happiness and satisfaction compared to nothing else in their experience before.

### 3.1.3. Intensity/ Levels of the experience of letting go

All the designers were asked to recall whether the experience of letting go had varied intensity within one experience and also across experiences.

The instance of the intensity within one experience did not have varied intensity. All the designers reported that the intensity seemed the same throughout the time the experience lasted. They recalled that they had lost all sense of time and space but were very much alert to their surroundings.

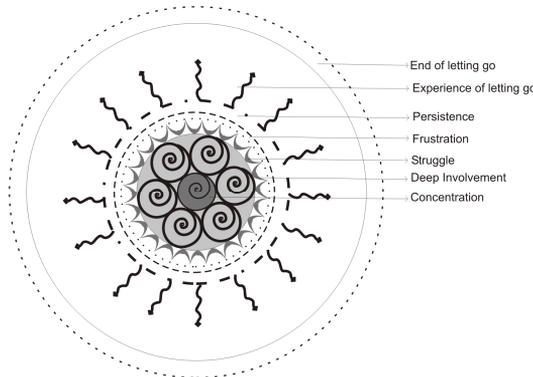
They also recalled that from the stage of concentration to the point of experiencing letting go they experienced an ascending intensity and the actual experience of letting go was a plateau experience.

And they did recall a change in the experience across experiences. They recalled a variance of the time that it lasted and most of them pointed the reason to the depth of involvement as the main reason. They also pointed to other external environmental disturbances also to be a factor due to which the experience could have shortened or terminated.

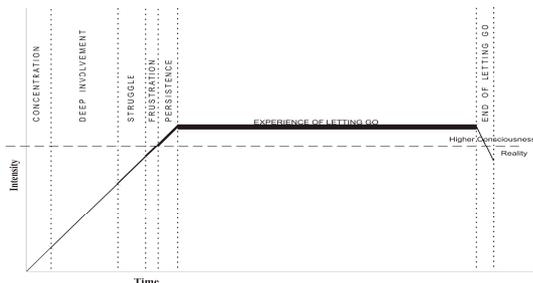
### 3.1.4. Feelings during the Experience

The subjects were asked to recall the feelings they felt while they were experiencing letting go.

The subjects reported varied feelings across different stages of the experience. These reporting were analyzed across the stages and results were arrived at.

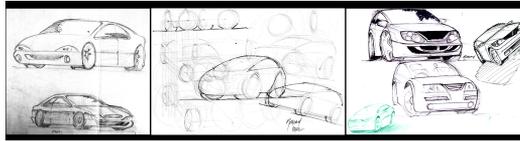


**Figure 2.** Graphical representation of the stages of the experience of letting go (Circles from inside –out: concentration, deep involvement, struggle, frustration, Persistence, experience of letting go, end of experience).



**Figure 3.** Intensity across stages of experience of letting go.

Stages of experience of letting go	Feelings
Concentration	Focusing from outside to inside
Deep involvement	Tension, digging inside for information, inquisitive, make meaning.
Struggle	Excitement, disappointment
Frustration	Frustration, giving up, losing interest
Persistence	Renewed interest, excitement, compulsion
Letting go experience	Feeling free, no bindings, Calm, excitement, very high energy, alert, increased sensitivity, floating
End of experience	Sense of loss, coming to reality, tiredness, a intrinsic happiness
Post the experience	A realization of what happened, deep satisfaction, enhanced confidence, powerful, sometimes surprise at achievement of creative output



**Figure 4.** Transformation in quality of creative output during and after the experience of phenomenon of letting go.

Out of the 15 designers, all of them reported that they were more likely to achieve this state of letting go when they are confronted with a personal challenge, like they really believed in the issue at hand, had a personal involvement with the topic. And 4 of them revealed that if they were challenged about their capacity or abilities, then they most surely achieved the state of letting go.

### 3.2. Issue 2: Relationship of the Phenomenon of Letting go to the Creative Output

The Data analysis revealed that there is a positive relationship of the phenomenon of letting go to the creative output. The designers revealed that the output is much better than their self assessed capabilities. They reported that the creative output in these instances of experience of letting go was exceptional as compared to instances which did not reach the state of letting go.

For Example: One of the designers shared his experience and also his drawings which show a marked transformation in terms of quality of his work. Figure 4 elaborates this transformation. The first drawing shows the quality of his work when he was struggling to sketch cars. The sketch 2 is of the moment when he experienced the phenomenon of letting go and in which he describes that the experience resulted in his acquiring the mantra of drawing the position the wheels and chassis in such a way that he had achieved a clear method of drawing cars. The sketch 3 shows the transformation in his quality of drawing and designing once he had the method of wheel alignment and chassis design during the experience of phenomenon of letting go.

### 3.3. Issue 3: The Relationship of the Experience of Letting go to the Design Process of Designers.

The designers were questioned for the experience of letting go in the design process.

The data was analyzed for the following issues

1. Experience of letting go in the area of design
2. Relation of the stages of the design process and instances of experiences of letting go
3. Relation of the process of experience of letting go to the cognitive process of creative design.

Phases of Design Process	No. of designers who experienced letting go	Percentage of instance of letting go
Problem Definition	15	100
Data Collection	2	13
Analysis	7	47
Ideation	15	100
Evaluation	0	0
Execution	13	87

Stages of experience of letting go	Cognitive processes
Concentration	Preparation
Deep involvement	Preparation, Incubation
Struggle	Preparation, Incubation
Frustration	Preparation, Incubation
Persistence	Incubation, Insight
Experience of letting go	Insight
End of letting go experience	Verification

### 3.3.1. Experience of Letting go in the Area of Design

The analysis revealed that only 7 out of 15 designers reported that they experienced letting go in the area of design. The others recalled that they had more instances of the experience in other areas like writing, poetry, games, cooking etc as compared to design. They pointed out that while working in design they feel bound by the practical and functional aspects, which hindered them from letting themselves go free to be able to have the experience. But they reported that they did have instances of letting go in design but not with the same intensity or quality as in other areas.

### 3.3.2. Relation of the stages of the design process and instances of experiences of letting go

The Design process happens in multiple phases of problem definition, Data Collection, Analysis, Ideation, Evaluation and Execution. The designers' experience of the phenomenon of letting go in these phases was analyzed

It was found that there is maximum possibility of having the experience of letting go in the problem definition and Ideation stages and to quite an extent in Execution phase.

### 3.3.3. Relation of the process of experience of letting go to the cognitive process of creative design

It was realized that the stages of letting go are a phenomenon in itself; they also could be understood from varied perspectives. Within psychology and design fields, the creative design process has been analyzed cognitively to give a thorough understanding of the thinking processes and styles involved within the process.

This paper tries to understand the relationship of the stages of the letting go experience in design process to the cognitive process of design.

The results show the preceding stages are mapping cohesively with the preparation and incubation processes of cognition and the experience of letting go is pure insight.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The study of the phenomenon of letting go in designers showed some interesting insights. This paper looks at the phenomenon itself and tries to understand it from the theory available and the retrospective accounts of the designers.

The theoretical study talks of peak experience (Maslow, 1962), peak performance (Privette, 1964) and Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The phenomenon experienced by the designers is similar to that of peak experience as well as peak performance, but not necessarily to Flow. Hence it was realized that one cannot use these terms in isolation. Based on the descriptions given by the designers, a new term, “letting go experience” has been introduced. The “experience of letting go” has all the qualities of peak experience, and also that of peak performance as in designers; the creative output is of significance. The experience of letting go may or may not have qualities of flow.

The study of the experience of designers gives an understanding of the phenomenon itself. The results show that the designers experience this phenomenon quite rarely and the instances of the experience are very clear in their memory. They can recall these experiences with clarity. These experiences stand out in their memory.

This study revealed that the phenomenon of letting go happened in stages. There are 7 stages to the phenomenon, concentration, deep involvement, struggle, frustration, persistence, experience of letting go, end of the experience of letting go. Each stage is extremely crucial. The study revealed that the designers do not always reach the stage of letting go. But when they do, each stage has its significance. The phenomenon itself is random, unpredictable and subjective. This paper just tries to understand it in its wholeness.

The study also revealed that there are varying intensities in the stages within one instance of experience. The stages preceding the experience have an ascending intensity while the actual experience is a plateau in intensity. The study suggests that there are no ups and downs in the experience itself, it is at a constant intensity. The experience is at the highest level as compared to other stages. The results also show that the experience varied in intensity when compared across multiple instances of the same person. The difference in intensity could be pointed at the amount of focus and attention in the preceding stages.

Feelings within the experience were analyzed and the results show that at every stage there are specific feelings which might be subjective and varying in quality as per the personality of the designer. But the feelings when in the state of letting go were more or less the same. The feelings when in the state of letting go include feeling free, no bindings, calm, excitement, very high energy, alertness, increased sensitivity, floating. Also post the experience, there is always a feeling of confidence about the output which leaves the designer feeling empowered and deeply satisfied. The experience is intrinsically fulfilling and rewarding and the designers do try to achieve this state for the quality of the output as also for the lived experience of the phenomenon itself.

The phenomenon of letting go is positively related to the creative output. Whenever the state of letting go is achieved, the output/performance is of higher quality than the self-assessed or expected capacity of that individual. Though it is well known that artists give a great significance to this “mystical” experience to their work, even designers give the onus of their creative spurts to the phenomenon of letting go. Whenever they achieve this state, the designers are confident that their output is of higher quality and everything about it is just right. They have a complete confidence of the acceptance of their output.

A further study would help understand the relation of time of being in the letting go experience to the quality of creative output.

The second part of the study gave an understanding of the relation of the phenomenon of letting go to the design process.

The study revealed an amazing fact that the designers experienced letting go more in other creative activities than design itself. This implied that the practical and functional aspect of design hindered the freedom of the designers to let go. The areas of design where these aspects were relatively less or were not present saw more instances of experience of letting go.

The paper also studied letting go experience to the stages of the design process. The results show that the problem definition, ideation and execution stages are more positively related to the letting go experience whereas data collection, analysis and evaluation are negatively related. It could be concluded that in stages where there is more freedom for creative thought there are more chances to experience letting go, than in the more practical, functional and analytical stages of data collection, analysis and evaluation.

The experience of letting go is personal, subjective and mystical, of higher consciousness level. An attempt has been made to try to understand the thinking processes and cognitive processes within the experience of letting go. The stages of concentration, deep involvement, struggle, frustration, can be mapped cohesively with the preparation and incubation processes; the experience of letting go is pure insight and the post letting go stage could be mapped to the verification stage of the cognitive process.

A deeper study needs to be done to understand the finer cognitive thinking processes within the experience.

Hence it can be concluded that the experience of letting go is vital to the designer to achieve a progression in his understanding and performance in creative output.

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