Doing Loss through Accepting what Is and the Role of Ambiguity Tolerance therin

"Leben kann letztlich nur angesichts von […] Verlusten gelebt werden, ja sie definieren es gerade." (Leu, 2019: p.13)

Loss is a faithful companion through life, because everything is in constant flux. Every moment is unique and passes (Biehler, 2009), just as one cannot step into the same river twice (Heraclitus). This is especially true in the accelerating world that we live in today. Paradoxically, loss is a taboo in our postmodern age and as a result legitimate ways of "doing loss" (cf. Reckwitz, 2020) are limited. This essay combines sociological (Alexander, 2012; Assmann, 2013; Günther, 2013; Junge, 2014; Bonnett, 2016; Elliot, 2018; Schalansky, 2018; Seeßlen, 2018; Reckwitz, 2019; Reckwitz, 2020), psychological (Freud, 2001; Haken, & Schiepek, 2006; Biehler, 2009; Leu, 2019; Lermer, 2020; Carter, 2020) and Buddhist approaches (Tolle; 1999; Moorjani, 2021) to explain what loss is, its consequences and how to cope with loss constructively (i.e. doing loss).

This essay is structured in two main parts: The first part summarises forms of loss found in the literature and subsequently explicates the relationship between loss and the ego. This includes showing that the biggest part of pain caused by loss stems from a lost connection to ourselves. At the end of the first part, this essay explains why doing loss is especially important nowadays. In the second part, by drawing on practices from Buddhism that are gaining grounds in psychological research (cf. Biehler, 2009), I suggest that training an "inner observer" that accepts what is and tolerates ambiguity is key of doing loss.

Part I

In order to give an idea about the diversity of loss, here I shall give an overview over various forms of loss (without any claim to completeness). As mentioned at the outset, change is omnipresent and farewells are, in whatever extent or form, parts of our daily lives. We may encounter loss of control or predictability, loss of a future expectation, loss of meaning, loss of values, loss of truth as a reference system, or social losses, such as loss of status, loss of recognition, loss of wealth and loss of power (Seeßlen, 2018 & Reckwitz, 2020). Loss can also come in the form of failure, nostalgia, separation from subjects and objects, and finally,

separation from ourselves (Tolle, 1999; Biehler 2009; Junge, 2014; Bonnett, 2016; Moorjani, 2012).

All forms of loss have at least three common denominators:

First, based on Reckwitz' (2020) attempt to find a broad, but accurate definition of loss, we feel loss when we perceive the disappearance of subjects, objects, phenomena or conditions as something *negative*. In contrast to the negative connotation of loss, which often is accompanied by negative emotions, disappearance may also be perceived as value-free, or even as positive. In the latter case we often talk about "getting rid of" instead of "losing" something or someone. The positively-laden disappearance is also what Reckwitz (2020) describes as the premise in modern progress narratives; The replacement of something old with something new is interpreted as a *gain* in the light of such progress narratives. Therefore, gain may be understood as the opposite of loss (Reckwitz, 2020).

Second, those who feel loss perceive this as *passively* happening to them against their will, instead of it being a result of an active choice. Loss feels like something uncontrollable that descends over the loser(s), to which, they in turn, have to react (Reckwitz, 2020; Seeßlen, 2018).

Third, loss makes us feel separated from a part of ourselves, such as our ambitions, hopes, dreams or our self-portrait (Seeßlen, 2018), if we are not yet experienced in doing loss well. In other words, all forms of loss essentially may bring about a loss of self (Freud, 2001) through an attack on our identity, whether individual or collective (Reckwitz, 2020). This is the aspect of loss that causes pain in addition to the potential grief about the loss itself. Buddhist theories underscore this distinction between pain caused due to an attack on the ego and pain that we feel when we grieve Understanding the difference is the key for doing loss and resolving the pain that comes from the attacked ego, as we will see later.

Ego, in Buddhism refers to the part of us that searches for our worth outside of oneself and that structures time into past, present and future. This "identification with the past and continuous compulsive projection into the future" is what Tolle (1999: p.66) calls "psychological time". "Psychological" is not merely a reference to an individual; The obsession with ruminating about the past, not living in the present, while planning for the future also has collective manifestations. According to Tolle (1999) and Biehler (2009), they occur in the form of

doctrines such as capitalism, where oneself and one's maximum gain stands in the centre of everybody's focus. We compare ourselves to others – if we are better it feeds our ego, if we are worse it hurts our ego. We believe that the highest good lies in the future and in maintaining the good things of the past and therefore waste no time on paying attention to the present moment in which we actually live. Collective manifestations of the ego are the reason why loss and ego are not merely a psychological topic, but also a sociological one.

Here, I'd like to pick up on a few forms of loss to demonstrate their relations with the ego. I will start with forms of loss having the common factor that they are about future projections – loss of control/predictability, loss of future expectations and failure. I will continue with forms of loss that are about the need to maintain the past: separations from loved ones and nostalgia. I will end with the separation from oneself – a form of loss that at the same time is the very cause of the pain that we feel when we lose.

Seeßlen (2018) describes loss of control or predictability as arguably the most relevant and problematic form of loss in our time. This is because modern age values "malleability & controllability" and detests uncertainty (Reckwitz 2020: p.9; translated from German by the author). The wish to overcome uncertainty, however, is an ego-based dream. The belief that we can, is in fact an illusion since any predictions are mere projections into the future (Tolle, 1999). Hence, in the face of loss of control, we may be paralysed because of two reasons: Firstly, we feel that we are at fault, since predictability should allegedly be possible with modern tools (Reckwitz, 2020). Secondly, because we are faced with the fact that there is no such thing as certainty, which the ego so desperately strives for in order to maintain its worth.

The same goes for loss of future expectations: As we experience life unfolding, we may need to give up on expectations that we had for the future, for which we had so carefully planned. Moreover, our ego may be threatened when we fear upcoming loss – through the projection of loss into the future when we anticipate certain changes (Reckwitz, 2020).

Failure in a sense entails the loss of future expectations since it denotes a non-attainment of a future goal (Leu, 2019; Junge, 2014). Here again we may feel that our inability to reach that goal is our own fault, because we have *failed* to anticipate problems and counteract them in time, which is so highly valued in the postmodern age. According to the economic calculus of our time, either we failed to obtain the necessary means to succeed or we failed to adapt the

goal (Junge, 2014). We may also experience failure when we do not comply with certain values and/or requirements with which we identified ourselves and upon which our self-worth depended. Failure is loss of self for the ego (Tolle, 1999).

When we experience loss in the form of separations from loved subjects or objects or nostalgia, we feel pain, because we feel like we failed to maintain the past. Bonnett (2016: p.6) points out that the fast-changing world in which we live in today, reinforces that "yearning for what is gone". Seeßlen (2018) questions what is it that we own and what is it that owns us? Ownership after all, in Buddhism (cf. Tolle, 1999), is an illusion. When we are unable to let go we get obsessed – we are owned by the loss. In other words, in the eyes of our ego we lost worth, because of what we do not have anymore.

As I demonstrated with these few examples, all forms of loss relate to the ego in how they threaten our identity and self-worth. However, the "real" loss of self occurs, when we are not living in the presence (Tolle, 1999). Therefore, separation from oneself arguably is the most severe and acute form of loss of our times, where the presence is reduced to a mere tool to understand the past and plan for the future. With respect to the difference between living in the presence and living in the future, Moorjani (2012) distinguishes between *being* versus *doing*. This corresponds to being motivation and deficiency motivation (Reckwitz, 2019). When motivated by the former, what we do is the end in itself, when motivated by the latter, what we do is the means to an end.

> *"When we live completely from the mind over a period of time, we lose touch with the infinite self, and then we begin to feel lost. This happens when we're in **doing** mode all the time, rather than **being**. The latter means living from the soul and is a state of allowing. It means letting ourselves be who and what we are without judgment. Being doesn't mean that we don't do anything. It's just that our actions stem from following our emotions and feelings while staying present in the moment. Doing, on the other hand, is future focused, with the mind creating a series of tasks that take us from here to there in order to achieve a particular outcome, regardless of our current emotional state."* (Moorjani, 2012: p.126)

In our rapidly changing world we have less and less time for being. Assmann (2013) describes how we lose touch with our sensual perception as a consequence of chronic physical and mental

overload. Sensual perception, however, is crucial for being in touch with oneself. Therefore, acceleration adds to loss of self.

Loss of self insofar is not merely a psychological topic, but also a sociological one, as the way we are socialised determines the way our ego defines our self-worth. Moreover, losing touch with ourselves may bring about change at collective levels. For example, according to Buddhism beliefs, there is no such thing as an inherently good or bad person; we only hurt others out of our own pain and our feelings of separation from each other (cf. Tolle, 1999; Biehler, 2009).

> *"Perpetrators are more than just victims of their own circumstances. They're the physical symptoms of underlying issues with us as a whole."* (Moorjani, 2012: p.144)

Our culture does not only teach us values, which the ego uses to define our self-worth, but also how to cope with loss (Seeßlen, 2018). Arguably, the biggest loss in today's Western society is that loss has become a taboo: "One is not allowed to think it, to feel it, to show it and to share it" (Seeßlen, 2018; translated from German by the author). Sentiments like fear, loss, sorrow and grief carry a negative connotation in a culture whose biggest values are maximisation of profit, progress and efficiency (Leu, 2019). This is because grief and coping with difficult emotions takes time, which is limited in our rapidly changing world (ibid.). Instead, we learned to appreciate instant gratification and to live in the future, which is promised to get better by the progress narrative of our culture. We are socialised to live through the linear psychological time, where we expect everything to be better in the future. There is no place for loss in that future. In today's "global, digital and post-industrial capitalism" (Seeßlen, 2018; translated from German by the author) we have lost constructive ways to cope with loss, because we deny and rob ourselves from the capacity to feel and deal with loss. As Seeßlen (2018) and Reckwitz (2020) point out, this is a paradox, since in an accelerated, progress-oriented world we deal with loss on a daily basis, where the new substitutes the old, which is judged to be lesser of value. Yet are loss and progress perceived as polar opposites, where passive loss is perceived as something to be avoided and loss due to progress something to strive for (Reckwitz, 2020). In fact, according to the progress paradigm, loss ought not to exist for two primary reasons. First, since there is no space in modern age for uncertainty, loss should be avoided by asserting control and anticipating the future (Junge, 2014). The postmodern age is a "loss reduction machine" – it obsessively tries to generate certainty by employing predictions and projections

(Reckwitz, 2020; translated from German by the author: p.14). Second, by definition, everything we lose will be substituted by something better according to the progress narrative (Reckwitz, 2020). If we feel loss nevertheless, it is the sole fault of the individual, who is left alone in dealing with it, since there is no such thing as a culture of loss.

The observation that *progress suppresses loss* in the postmodern age is one of three aspects that help us understand why it has become ever more important to learn how to cope with loss in a constructive way. The second aspect is that the denial of loss leads to "*loss potentiation*" (Reckwitz, 2020). Loss potentiation happens through several mechanisms which condition and reinforce each other.

First, accelerated progress – as mentioned above – necessarily leads to an accumulation of losses which we ought to perceive as positive, but secretly may not always do so.

Second, there is no legitimate way to cope with loss, since it ought not to exist in the first place, so we have no way to overcome its accumulation.

> *"[Postmodern culture] leaves bereaved people confused and insecure in their grief."* (Parkes and Prigerson, 2010: p.211)

Third, the implicit progress narrative is not only applied to wider societal contexts, but also to the individual, which increases the potential of failure ever more. We ought to optimise ourselves and our lives and live up to our fullest potential (Reckwitz, 2020). Self-development became a normative goal in the 1990s (Reckwitz, 2019). With its progress narrative, postmodern culture goes as far as to suggest to individuals that they have a *right* for things to improve in the future and to realise themselves (Reckwitz, 2019). Because improvement and optimization have become normative expectations, we may even perceive an obligation to never stand still or look back, but to always look forward to how we can get better. Self-development in the postmodern age entails the ideal of authenticity, which not only means to be "real" or "self-consistent" (Reckwitz, 2019: p.214; translated from German by the author), but also requires us to not compromise our own values and to be unique in contrast to "like everybody else" (ibid.), resulting in constant dissociation from others and singularisation. In the postmodern age, however, we ought not only to be successful in advancing ourselves, but also in social contexts (Reckwitz, 2019). This cultural imperative to be successful leads to

contradictions and tensions: We need to be authentic, on the one hand, but also socially successful on the other hand, by adhering to culturally-valued norms. We need to be different from others, but also fit in. We are required to be authentic, but ought not to experience any negative emotions, such as loss, for which there is no space or time in the postmodern age (Bonnett, 2016). We feel entitled to have a better future, and have no way to deal with the disappointment when reality comes to be different. Because we are taught to believe that we are equipped with all the tools necessary to improve ourselves and be socially successful, both of which are associated with only positive emotions, the risk of failure is systematically programmed into the postmodern culture (Reckwitz, 2019). Nowadays we can fail at so many different levels, in so many ways, and worst of all – we are left with the feeling that it is our own fault with no legitimate ways of coping with the negative emotions. On the contrary, we are required to present our failure in a light that benefits our exemplary biography (Günther, 2013: p.230).

The necessary consequence of the postmodern culture denying loss on the one hand, and fostering loss on the other hand, is the *resurgence of loss* in illegitimate, persisting and explosive ways (Reckwitz, 2020 & 2019). This is the third aspect of loss in the postmodern age that we need to understand in order to find constructive ways to cope with loss.

Freud taught that we cannot get rid of negative emotions by denying them, which corresponds to banning them to our subconscious. When we try to do so, they will resurface in toxic ways that lie outside of our control. This may not only happen on an individual level, but also on a cultural and political level, such as cultural traumas (Alexander, 2012) or political movements of losers and victims (Reckwitz 2020). When surfacing, after having been suppressed, negative emotions may become explosive on an individual and also start manifesting on a social level. We may end up with no sense of self-worth, with fear of failure or with outward anger (Reckwitz 2019). It is not a coincidence that depression has become a common illness[1]. Furthermore, if not dealt with, the pain of loss persists:

> *"Nicht was weg ist, ist am Verlorenen so grauenhaft, sondern was immer noch da ist, die Schatten und Spuren, das Sehnen und Verschmelzen."* (Seeßlen, 2018)

[1] https://www.who.int/health-topics/depression

Hence, the perished does not really get lost, but is held present in the mind(s) of the bereaved, which may go as far as to the formation of a collective memory (Rechwitz, 2020).

The resurgence of loss at both, psychological and social levels, as a consequence of its denial and fostered accumulation at the same time, is the reason why Reckwitz (2020) pleads for the recognition of loss experiences as a social phenomenon. Both, the existence of loss and its negative emotional consequences, need to be taken seriously in order to cope with loss and to avoid explosive consequences of societal magnitude. Biehler (2009) underscores that need for recognition by advocating for education in self-development topics, such as coping with separations.

A constructive way to cope with loss would not only avoid negative consequences of its denial, but would also lead us to become free of the pain that is caused by the ego's attempt to define our self-worth. Doing loss constructively therefore, may help us grow spiritually. I mean this in the sense of self-development for the sake of it and not as a means to the end of an optimised self. Doing loss brings about *transformative opportunities*.

> *„Simply avoiding loss so as to sustain what we have—"we" being those of us living privileged lives in privileged places—may miss more transformative opportunities."* (Elliot, 2018; p.330)

> *„Jede Krise birgt tausendmal mehr Wachstumspotenzial in sich als Zeiten, wo alles reibungslos funktioniert."* (Biehler, 2009: p.15)

Which leads me to the second part of this essay, in which I demonstrate how doing loss constrictively consists of three parts: perceiving what is, accepting what is and saying what is. They are not meant to be more or less consecutive phases of grief like the "stages of grief" (cf. Leu, 2019; Biehler, 2009), which are useful to grow from pain. Rather, they are attitudes that will help us get back in touch with ourselves, which ultimately enables us to deal with difficult emotions, such as loss.

Part II

Perceiving what is

Disillusioning is necessary for growth to happen (Tolle, 1999). This is because, in Buddhism, ownership in whatever form is an illusion. Therefore, gain and loss are illusions too (ibid.). Moreover, traumas and identities are also social constructions:

> *"[…] loss is something that is both reacted to and actively produced, both materially real and socially constructed and mediated."* (Elliot, 2018: p.323)

> *"Rather than descriptions of what is, [collective traumas] are arguments about what must have been and what should be."* (Alexander, 2012: p.4)

> *"Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity's earlier life."* (Alexander, 2012: p.26)

The fact that something is an illusion does not mean that it cannot have real manifestations in the physical world, such as neurological ones, or consequences for individuals or society (cf. Thomas Theorem[2]). However, accepting that, as a last consequence, all our worldly experiences are transitionary and illusionary (Biehler, 2009), helps us to clear away the clouds and perceive the light of what is. This takes a lot of practice, because we have been trained in sharpening our minds towards (value) judgements and labelling (cf. Lermer, 2020).

> *"My mind cannot* know *you, only labels, judgments, facts, and opinions about you."* (Tolle, 1999)

As explained above, being absorbed in psychological time and future projections, for which our postmodern culture advocates, is also illusionary. This is easily understood when we think about utopias or dystopias, since they are fiction. However, in reality any projection, whether into the future, or onto a subject or an object is just as much of an illusion. The only thing that is, is the Now.

[2] "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas & Thomas 1928, p.572)

> *"You will observe that the future is usually imagined as either better or worse than the present. If the imagined future is better, it gives you hope or pleasurable anticipation. If it is worse, it creates anxiety. Both are illusory."* (Tolle, 1999: p.64)

Projections and predictions may help us to navigate through life, but ultimately, certainty is an illusion as well. Not only in a rapidly changing society is the only certainty uncertainty[3], but this also applies to the social world in general.

What we need to learn in order to reconnect with ourselves is to perceive our own self-worth independently of our social status or our relationships. The disillusioning that comes with that realisation rarely comes pain-free, but it also poses an immense opportunity to grow. One may even feel the relief that comes with reintegrating this truth into one's life (Biehler, 2009).

Accepting what is

Accepting that finding our own value outside of ourselves is an illusion is a huge step, which brings us closer to getting back in touch with ourselves. This includes a "reorientation from future-targeted and security-focussed thinking to the Now" (Biehler, 2009: p.23; translated from German by the author). By giving one's "fullest attention to whatever the moment presents" one *accepts what is* (Tolle, 1999). In fact, "seeing the reality of the situation in the present moment", frees us up and move forward, even in the face of uncertainty (Carter, 2020).

> *"The opposite of uncertainty is not certainty; it's presence."* (Carter, 2020)

Related to uncertainty is the concept of ambiguity. In our complex world, there are few situations that can be perceived as black or white. Instead, situations, issues and feelings may be so complex that their reflection includes many different interpretations, which may even seem contradicting. Because in our accelerating postmodern age we value certainty so highly, we also tend to make black or white classifications. This seemingly reduces the complexity of the world and makes phenomena more tangible, which gives us the illusion of simplicity and

[3] "Uncertainty is the only certainty there is, and knowing how to live with insecurity is the only security." (John Allen Paulos in "A Mathematician Plays the Market")

certainty and helps us to make decisions (Lermer, 2020). While this mechanism is vital, on the one hand to navigate through our complex world, it also means that we have lost the ability to cope with ambiguity on the other hand. In the postmodern culture, which mostly values positive emotions, feeling negative or ambiguous about something is inherently scary (Reckwitz, 2019). *Accepting ambivalence* is to tolerate ambiguity and to therefore not feel threatened by the complexity and uncertainty of the world. Note that accepting ambivalence means that one does not need to decide between *either* to make value assessments that aid decisions *or* accepting that there may be other aspects that we are disregarding in the assessment. In other words, on the one hand there is an ambivalence about the necessity to reduce complexity to navigate through the world, and, on the other hand, the necessity to accept ambiguity in order to perceive the situation as it is. Ambiguity tolerance is the ability to *transcend* the bipolar "either-or" thinking and to accept the tension arising from ambivalent circumstances. Only if we do not deny certain aspects of a situation in favour for simplicity and controllability do we perceive what is and are we able to live in the present.

When applied to doing loss, ambiguity tolerance means to reflect on and accept all forms of negative and positive emotions that come with that particular experience. An interesting example is a separation from a loved one. If we are not fully in touch with ourselves, we may not only feel the grief from losing that person – as we would if that person died –, but may also feel threatened in our identity. Freud (2001: p.200) refers to the former as grief and the latter as melancholy: "In grief the world has become poorly and empty, in melancholy it is the self itself". A separation brings about both, grief work and ego work, both of which are important in order to grow from the situation and to be truly able to move on (Biehler, 2009). Differentiating between grief and ego work brings an important conclusion: grief is the state of being sad due to a loss *without* the disturbance of one's self-confidence with which that loss likely came (Freud, 2001). Seeing that difference is important in understanding what *moving on* actually means. Contrary to what we are taught in our accelerated society, where we ought not look back, but reframe the loss as something positive for the future, **moving on does not mean to not be sad anymore about the loss**. That is perhaps, the most important ambivalence to accept if we want to do loss constructively. Getting over someone does not mean not missing that person or not being sad about the loss anymore. **Instead, moving on means that our happiness and self-worth does not depend on that person (anymore)**. Not doing the grief work results in not accepting the loss of the person. Not doing the ego work has the consequence that we let our self-worth remain dependent on the lost person. Denying us from the sadness

that potentially will always remain after losing somebody does not mean moving on, but corresponds to repression of loss which will therefore resurface in uncontrollable ways. Moving on does not necessarily entail extinguishing a person from one's memory or life, but to keep an inner representation of the lost person present (Leu, 2019) and to make peace with that representation as part of one's past. In that state of mind, we may also be able to forgive[4] that person and ourselves for any pain caused during the relationship (Biehler, 2009).

In summary, the key to doing loss is to reconnect with ourselves (doing the ego work), to allow oneself enough time to grieve and to accept ambivalent feelings. If we want a more constructive approach to loss, we need to remove the taboo from sadness and other negative emotions and accept them as part of life.

> *„Am Leben zu sein bedeutet, Verluste zu erfahren."* (Schalansky, 2018: p.14)

> *"A big part of acceptance is accepting how we feel about difficult circumstances and difficult people in our lives."* (Carter, 2020)

"The inner observer" (Tolle, 1999) is a concept that describes the reflection on one's feelings without judgement while being present in the Now. In difficult situations we tend to go into auto-pilot – into ego-survival mode – where our identity is threatened and we act out of fear.

> *"In those instances, the tendency is for you to become 'unconscious'. The reaction or emotion takes you over — you 'become' it. You act it out. You justify, make wrong, attack, defend . . . except that it isn't you, it's the reactive pattern, the mind in its habitual survival mode."* (Tolle, 1999: p.65)

That is why especially difficult situations, like experiencing loss, require an intense presence in the Now (ibid.). In training the inner observer, we learn to recognise when we are caught up in ego-survival mode and develop the ability to distance ourselves from those emotions. We do not judge them, we are not the emotions, but we see them and accept them as part of the Now. The point is to understand that feeling bad isn't bad, but part of life; it is feeling bad about

[4] On a side note: ambiguity tolerance is also vital in forgiving. Forgiving does not mean to agree with somebody's actions. If we understand that humans only act evilly out of our own pain (cf. Biehler, 2009; Moorjani, 2012), we may forgive a person even if we distance ourselves from their actions. When we accept the ambivalence between not agreeing with the person and not judging the person for it, we can forgive.

feeling bad that makes us feel miserable. Coming back into the Now and reflecting on what is, gives us the strength to accept difficult emotions and tensions arising from ambivalence. Accepting emotions without judgement is the only way in which difficult emotions can dissolve at all (Biehler, 2009) – it is also how we reconnect with ourselves.

Now that I have explained the importance of accepting what is and the role of ambiguity tolerance in this, I would like to emphasise the ambivalence of two concepts that have been mentioned in this essay. So far, I may have given the impression that first, the ego is something bad that needs to be overcome and second, looking into the past or planning for the future is wrong. Neither is what I intended to say and only if we understand the ambivalence ego versus self, and the Now versus psychological time, can we reconnect with ourselves and the world[5].

When we have our inner observer present in the Now, we may choose to use the ego as a tool for navigating through life (Moorjani, 2012). A tool is something that is a useful instrument to get us somewhere, but we don't identify ourselves with it. "In the practical realm of day-to-day living" (Tolle, 1999: p.63) where we need to "make enough money to put food on the table and make the rent" (Moorjani, 2012: p.126) the ego may be useful, because it knows how to navigate in a world with rules. The same goes for using time; Tolle (1999) distinguishes between being stuck in *psychological time* and using *clock time* in the practical aspects of life. When we live by the former, we are constantly immersed in the past and future. When we use clock time, we do so out of a conscious decision by our inner observer and "immediately return to present-moment awareness when those practical matters have been dealt with" (Tolle, 1999: p.65-66). Hence, the enlightened person uses their ego and clock time as tools, while not being trapped in them. They live in the Now, while being "peripherally aware of time" (ibid.: p.66).

> *"Clock time is not just making an appointment or planning a trip. It includes learning from the past so that we don't repeat the same mistakes over and over. Setting goals and working toward them. Predicting the future by means of patterns and laws, physical,*

[5] Feeling connected with oneself comes with a feeling of unity with the world (Moorjani, 2012). Practices that encourage being present in the Now, such as meditation, foster this feeling of reconnection. In addition, studies have shown that psychedelic drugs can have the same effects as a space journey in perceiving a „unity and interconnectedness of life" (https://aeon.co/essays/psychedelics-can-have-the-same-overview-effect-as-a-space-journey). Astronauts call this experience the "overview effect" as it comes from looking at the pale blue dot ,that is our home planet, as a whole with no borders and the whole ecosystem being one.

> *mathematical and so on, learned from the past and taking appropriate action on the basis of our predictions."* (Tolle, 1999: p.66)

Accepting the paradox that being present in the Now does not exclude planning for the future and that feeling connected with oneself and the world does not mean that we can't use our ego as a tool, is important to train our inner observer to perceive what is. By being free from the chains of the ego and time, the inner observer is truly free to choose.

> *"To be free of time is to be free of the psychological need of past for your identity and future for your fulfilment. It represents the most profound transformation of consciousness that you can imagine."* (Tolle, 1999: p.79)

Freedom of choice and reflection, both aspects of the inner observer, are the foundation of free will according the biologist Bruce Lipton:

> *"We can actively choose how to respond to most environmental signals and whether we even want to respond at all. The conscious mind's capacity to override the subconscious mind's preprogrammed behaviors is the foundation of free will."* (Lipton, 2005: p.134)
> *"Thus the conscious mind offers us free will, meaning we are not just victims of our programming."* (Lipton, 2005: p.169)

In conclusion, I argue that self-determined and free-willed behaviour arises out of presence in the moment and acceptance of what is. Going back to that place in the Now and thereby reconnecting with oneself is key for doing loss. By accepting all emotions that are present without judgement we are letting go of the grip they have on us. We may still be sad, but without feeling bad about it.

Saying what is

Lastly, when we perceive a situation as it is and we accept it as it is, we may also say it as it is. This term – "Sagen was ist" – originally stems from the famous German philosopher Hannah Arendt (1961) and denotes factual truths in history and politics. Translating saying what is to the context of a difficult situation, such as loss, means to speak bluntly and truthfully about the

outcomes of the reflection of the inner observer. In the context of emotions, saying what is may not be so much about objective truths or facts, but more about how the situation is perceived. By saying what is, we are doing loss, because we construct a narrative that we share with others to receive support and that gives us meaning.

As painful as it may be, when we repeatedly remember and recount our loss, we start to see a golden thread of meaning and purpose (Leu, 2019). This is important to make sense of the world and to feel inner coherence. Inner coherence and a feeling of purpose are important for our well-being (e.g. Haken & Schiepek, 2006). That is why an important part of doing loss is to make sense of the experience, so as to integrate it into our system of meaning (Leu, 2019). By telling others about the traumatic experience, we are not only strengthening the golden thread, but also sharing our emotions. Sharing emotions is usually mirrored by empathy (cf. Seeßlen, 2018), which helps us to get over a loss. A strong social network that gives us stability in the face of the unsettling experience of the loss and empathy for the emotions that came with it, is strong predictor of personal growth following trauma.

> *"Who says what is […] always tells a story, and in this story the particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning. It is perfectly true that 'all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them […].'"* (Arendt, 1961: p.262)

Conclusion

Doing loss has become ever more important in our accelerated postmodern world, which focusses on progress (positively-framed loss) and denounces negative feelings that may stand in the way of a better future. This essay argues that the key to coping with loss constructively (i.e. doing loss) lies in the undoing the loss of being in touch with oneself. This is because a big part of the pain with which loss may come stems from the hurt ego that had a part of one's identity invested in what has been lost.

Reconnecting with oneself involves being present in the Now. This means to detach oneself from the difficult situation and observe it as the "inner observer" without judgement. When we do that, we perceive and accept the situation as it is, with all its complexities and ambiguities. Developing *ambiguity tolerance* is vital for the inner observer to make sense of our postmodern world, which is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA). While we need to accept that uncertainty is a fact of life, and that projections into the future are an illusion, we may still

plan ahead if that is the best we can do in the moment. This is what I described as the ambivalence between being present in the moment and ego-driven behaviour (such as planning). Arguably, we act self-determined and free-willed, when we choose consciously between being and doing.

Being requires full consciousness of the present moment. It does not mean following our emotions blindly without reflection, nor being irrational. It also does not mean we cannot plan or think about the future. We can use future-focussed *doing* as a tool to make plans or develop strategies to achieve a goal. Using doing as a tool means remaining present in the moment, in full consciousness and open to unexpected events for which we did not plan. We remain in a state of being – a condition where, according to Tolle (1999), we can "accept what is". Living in the present, accepting and saying what is, are all forms of being. Being makes us live our lives more at ease with both, ourselves and others, making it a constant area of development for us as individuals to live a more joyful life. In a state of being, we may grieve our loss, but we do not lose ourselves in it.

> *"Neither failure nor success has the power to change your inner state of Being."* (Tolle, 1999: p.77)

Integrating ambiguity tolerance into our lives would mean a paradigm shift away from bipolar either-or thinking. It would mean to accept the complexity of our world and give us the ability to unfold our identity, instead of making it dependent on outer circumstances. Accepting loss as a fact of life instead of trying to overcome them will bring us inner peace. Making sense of them and talking about them to others supports that process of doing loss. We cannot choose what happens to us and we may not even choose how we react to it when we are in ego-survival mode. However, we can choose how we react to that reaction, by going into being state and applying the inner observer.

Not coping with loss constructively may not merely only lead to individual psychological problems, but also to collective ones. Pain that is not processed manifests in individual and collective memories and may come out in unexpected and explosive ways. As Biehler (2009, p.18) puts it, "partner conflicts and separations are small-scale exercises for world peace". By reconnecting with ourselves, we reconnect with others (Moorjani, 2012) and hence we do not want to hurt others. Getting back in touch with ourselves also brings deceleration into our

accelerated society. Elliot (2018) argues that deceleration in terms of less consumption and less working hours will lead to healthier individuals and good consequences for our environment. If we act more out of being than out of doing, we may want to live in synergy with others and nature, instead of maximising our own gain and minimising our own loss.

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