

Response to Roger S. Gottlieb, "Spirituality and Healing"
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Roger Gottlieb has created a piece of art in surveying the literature on how meditation and Yoga might help reduce pain and suffering, then switching to a heart-felt narration of struggles within his own family. His daughter Esther, born with multiple disabilities, has two qualities that many "normal" people lack: wisdom and perseverance in the face of adversity. Undoubtedly affirmative parenting helped nurture Esther. Roger and his wife helped inculcate her with empathy for others, an empathy that prompted her to urge all parents with disabled children to not blame themselves. When things go wrong, so often people turn to self-blame. But, as Esther adroitly observes, blaming oneself does not help.

Asian philosophy operates on principles of cause and effect. Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains, though they disagree on theological issues, agree that actions from the past affect the present and that actions in the present shape the future. While we are wise to heed Esther's advice and not blame ourselves when things go wrong, and hence deepen and compound our suffering, Asian thought suggests it might be helpful to ask the important questions: who? what? where? why? how? For a dozen years, from the age of 18 until 30, I trained in classical Yoga with Gurani Anjali at Yoga Anand Ashram in Amityville, New York. Our teacher was the only woman in the first wave of Yoga teachers from India who were allowed to migrate to the United States due to immigration law reform in 1965 prompted by the Civil Rights Movement. Rather than ascribing blame, she saw adversity as an opportunity to ask probing questions of oneself. She pushed her students to turn inward and find clarity, to find understanding through the ascetic practices of Yoga.

According to Yoga, physical, mental, and emotional problems arise due to five obfuscating factors: ignorance, egotism, attachment, revulsion, and fear of death. The ignorant person views things as permanent, pure, pleasure-generating, and ego-defining. These things might be tangible such as an automobile or abstract, such as a test score. However, no automobile lasts forever or stays clean or always runs perfectly or garners praise from all people. Similarly, a perfect test score yields only temporary happiness. Misplaced ego causes pain to oneself and annoys other people. Attachment to pleasure or pain can result in addiction. And "denial of death," as so deftly described by Ernst Becker, robs people of a central reality: nothing lasts forever. More than 50% of the U.S. health expenditure happens in the last six months of life.

By questioning motivation in states of active meditation, stories can arise that explain compulsive behaviors. Some of these stories may pertain to one's upbringing. Other stories might be other people's stories that hold resonance with one's situation, which is why good literature always holds the potential to improve us. Anjali summarized both the studies by Jon Kabat Zinn and others and the wisdom of Esther with the following adage: Seek understanding. With understanding comes acceptance. With acceptance comes peace. In peace we find our freedom. Esther has clearly mastered her story. She understands that her parents did not wish for her to suffer. She is able to speak to God in a way that gives her solace, a God so large as to be inscrutable. She suffers, and yet she knows she is loved by her supportive parents. Due to their inspiration, she makes the most of a difficult situation, extending hope to others.

Asian thought brings one great truth: the world provides suffering. To the extent that this suffering prompts us to ask the big questions, it can be an important catalyst to overcome the mentality of victimhood and find the peace within our bodies and breath to calm the mind and live in the present moment. Meditation can lead to a state of mindfulness, the first step to understanding. As the studies have shown, returning ourselves to the realities of the present moment can help prevent avoidable suffering. Perseverating about what could have been, what should have been, what would have been is not only fruitless but detrimental. Esther can inspire us all to accept what we must accept and change the one thing over which we can develop control: our thoughts and attitudes.