

## FREEDOM LOST AND FOUND

Wherever we are, whatever has happened to us, whatever we have done or not done, the basis of our existence is good, open, pure, and unchanging. If we open to this open ground, to this still, radiant source, we can find contentment. As we know from our own painful experience getting lost is easy. However, although we have wandered here and there chasing dreams and fleeing pain, we have never actually strayed from the ever-open ground of our being.

Where we are is not where we think we are. Being at home where we are is revealed to us when we allow ourselves to be present and not distracted by the ideas and judgements that are currently passing through our mind. However due to our attachment to ideas, due to our belief in the patterns we have inherited and created so far in our lives, we are prone to surrender to habits, tendencies, and impulses. Being caught up in these transient seductions we wander in dreamtime and it is as if we are being led astray from where we actually are.

Healthy growth for all living forms – animals, trees, people, plants – requires balance, the ‘middle way’. Not too much, not too little; neither invasion nor abandonment. Too much sun and the plant dries up. Too much rain and it collapses and rots before the ripening of its potential.

When we were young we yearned for the constant presence of supportive love, love to enrich our capacity for enjoyment and freedom. But unfortunately this was not our constant daily experience.

Due to the intentional or circumstantial unreliability of those to whose care we were entrusted we have all experienced degrees of invasion and abandonment. This can be mild or extreme. Invaded by rules, by demands beyond our capacity, by the overwhelming desires and preoccupations of others, our bodies and minds can be invaded, sexually, by violence, or by denigration. We can also be abandoned by not being cleaned or fed, not being seen or listened to, not being met or valued and so on.

Invasion and abandonment bring sadness, loneliness, a lack of trust, and an increase in anxiety and agitation. So many sensations, thoughts and feelings arise and we are so little prepared to deal with them. Our own behaviour becomes volatile and our avoidance and impulsivity generate new problems for us.

Invasion and abandonment by others leads to lack and excess in ourselves. We lack calm and contentment, confidence and dignity, in fact we lack all that can be nurtured by enabling love. Smothering love also leads to lack as there is little space to breathe and grow when parents cannot let go. With this lack, this sense of not being whole, complete, enough, at ease, there arises an excess of anger, frustration, helplessness, and worthlessness. This excess fills us and preoccupies us so that we are often blind to the healing potential of new situations.

However when we find the tantalising medicine of alcohol and drugs, chemical calming becomes available. This chemical feel-good, this artificial well-being, is an instant relief that no one has so far provided for us. I may be a mess but 'me plus substance' is not worried, is free .... for a moment. The high must be maintained or the low is even worse than before. We become needy, desperate, driven and then our unskilful actions lead us into trouble and finally into prison.

The pains we have experienced have complex causes, for those who hurt us have also been hurt and harmed and are unbalanced by their own anxiety, rage and suffering. Blaming others or ourselves will not help. But seeing how the situation emerged can aid us to manage the disturbances in our energy and find more harmony, dignity and simple enjoyment. Dignity is not an artificial inflation nor a defensive posturing but the calm strong presence that manifests when we are fully embodied and open to our potential. Our anxious ego learns how to posture and pretend but underneath there is fear and agitation. Lack of trust keeps us hyper-vigilant and ready to react even when the situation is one we could enjoy. Yet deep dignity is always available when we do not abandon who we truly are.

It is a painful fact that if we do not take responsibility for managing the effects of what happened to us we will continue to be under the power of habits, reaction-formations, tendencies and impulses. This may seem unfair but as we painfully come to see, this world is not fair. We have to work with the situations we find ourselves in and continue to develop our capacity to do this.

Just as we have been invaded and abandoned so we continue this pattern, invading our bodies with substances they don't need and abandoning our bodies and our hearts by denying them the healthy sustenance we *do* need. Moreover, our preoccupation with our own habits and impulses leads us to invade and abandon others, as we do not attune to their actual needs and wishes.

We all know how easy it is to make a decision to change but then not be willing or able to carry it through. This is often due to our being divided in ourselves. We have aspects which seek ease and healing and we have aspects which seek excitement, self-abandonment and even self-destruction. When these aspects function separately, without communication with the other aspects of ourselves, our voice cannot speak for all of us and so our 'yes' is never a full 'yes' and our 'no' is never a full 'no'. When this is the case, our unresolved inner conflicts make us impulsive rather than decisive, avoidant rather than attentive, and in this way we sabotage our lives.

Struggling to control our thoughts and impulses is exhausting and it is tempting to give up. Yet there is a middle way between struggle and collapse. We can make friends with our mind. There are two aspects to our mind: what arises in it as thoughts, feelings, sensations, hungers, and so on; and the mind itself, the basic clarity that reveals each and every experience.

By learning to be mindful we can start to free our clarity from all the tumbling, demanding thoughts, memories and cravings that arise in the mind. Focusing on the flow of our breath and learning to be contented with the simplicity of this is a great freedom. It is the inner

freedom that frees us to move in the world in a kind and present way without being led astray by old tendencies and new temptations.

To explore our potential for calm clarity we sit with an erect yet comfortable posture so that our spine supports our weight letting our muscles relax. We are always breathing and this gives rise to subtle sensation at our nostrils as we inhale and exhale. We focus on this gentle sensation. Our intention is to have this as our sole focus of attention. When we find that our attention has wandered off to follow a thought, a movement near us, or whatever catches our attention, we gently bring our attention back to our focus on the breath at the nostrils, without blame or further thoughts about how and why we wandered off.

If we persist in this we will find that we are gradually becoming free of our habitual tendency of going under the power of whatever is occurring. Something arises and we get caught up in it. Who is the one who gets lost in the object, who merges with the thought or feeling or sensation as if it were all that we needed or wanted? It feels as if it were 'I, me, myself' who gets lost. I get lost when I merge with the thought. I did not have that thought a moment ago but now it has arisen and it feels like me, feels relevant to me, is telling me about me. For example, it might be, 'I need a cigarette.' This might feel true, so I take one from the packet and light it. I am obeying a thought because I believe it tells me the truth. Yet it is just a thought. It can only catch me if I believe in it. If a thought arises, 'I need to score', then I start thinking about how to get the resources to get the drug. Why am I believing that thought? Of course it is not just a simple thought but is a thought rich in habits, memories and feelings. This makes it feel powerful and true.

Yet if I pause and observe the thought I see that it vanishes. The thought that could catch me and lead me into extreme activity and lostness is itself transient and without inherent power. It is my belief in the thought that gives it its power! When we see this the door to profound freedom opens. I do not need to hook on to and follow my thoughts, feelings, habits, impulses, random desires, flashes of anger, sadness, and all the wild and strange weather that passes through the open sky of my mind.

A thought arises in my mind and I respond. In the moment of my responding I am a thought. 'I' is empty of its own content. It fills itself with 'not-I', with opinions and attitudes it has adopted from the environment and calls it 'I'. In the course of an hour we experience many forms of 'I': happy, sad, distracted, tired, interested. 'I' fills with, and shows, and seems to be, whatever occurs.

The more we focus on a simple object like the breath and then relax, the more we can be aware of the flow of arising and passing moments of experience. Awareness is not 'I', the self, the individual subject. Awareness is the simple presence, the clarity which reveals all that comes and goes, all that we take to be self and other. Seeing this, our freedom opens ever deeper and wider. This open awareness has no fixed content yet is always filling and emptying like the wing-mirror on a car.

Being alive, being here, now, open, I am returned to my potential as the limiting definitions put by self and others lose their hold. Now so much more is available and I am so much

more available to receive and respond. Life is lighter. The puppet-strings of habit and defended vulnerability are cut. Life is playful and after all the dark years I can play again.

James Low, November 2017