

# *Finding Freedom When You Feel Trapped*

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*James Low*

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*Transcribed by John Imes*

*Edited by Barbara Terris*

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*Paolo Zorutti asked James to contribute to his project of bringing the teaching of various meditation masters to people in prisons. As a result James made a short video recording and this is the transcript. If you want to watch the video you can see it at <https://vimeo.com/132013763>.*

*These meditation instruction can be useful for everyone, since, as James says, there are the outer prisons of metal doors, stone walls and iron bars and there are the inner prisons of our habitual, negative and often punishing ways of thinking. We all live in a prison of sorts.*

*One of the functions of meditation practice is to free us from our inner prisons.*

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I'm James Low. I've been involved with Buddhist meditation for forty years, and I've found it very beneficial, and I want to share a little bit of some practices with you.

## Outer prison and inner

There are many different kinds of prison in life. Clearly there are outer prisons where we are held inside a locked environment and we lack freedom to move. Metal doors, stone walls, iron bars certainly constitute a powerful kind of prison. But we also have an inner prison of our own thoughts, feelings, memories, hopes and fears, which trap us in very habitual and often punishing ways of thinking. And then we have a very innermost prison, which is the core beliefs we have about ourselves, perhaps believing that we are unlovable or that we've wasted our lives. Such negative beliefs seem to sum us up and put us in a very, very small box.

## Meditation as a way to freedom

One of the functions of meditation practice is to free ourselves from these inner prisons, even though we may remain trapped in the particular constricting physical environments. Because we have to live with our own mind, we live with our thoughts and beliefs, and these very powerfully determine what happens to us. In the course of the day, there are some events which are pleasant, some events which are not so pleasant. Pleasant or unpleasant, all events are very transient. They are impermanent. They are here and then they're gone. Nobody can stop the flow of time, and yet strangely our own mind grasps on to negative experiences. Somebody says something cruel or we are blocked and not allowed to do something that we want to do, and it

starts turning and turning in our mind, and we suffer more and more. The event is gone, but we continue to persecute ourselves by not being able to let go.

So, a basic function of meditation is to enable us to let go of immersion in our thoughts.

## Taking refuge

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In order to do this, traditionally, we take refuge. Taking refuge means finding a refuge other than the things that we habitually rely on. On an outer level, we can get lost in alcohol, drugs and crazy behavior of all different kinds, and we need something to separate ourselves from the impulses that take us in. But at least you know, if you're lighting a cigarette or if you're opening a bottle of beer, that there's something *outside* which you can see: *'Oh, I've decided I don't want to do this, but still I have the impulse to do it.'* When the impulse is just happening inside your mind, it's more difficult to recognise.

So basically we take refuge in the idea of freedom. In the Buddhist tradition, this is called our buddha-nature, our potential for being fully awake, for being free, our capacity to be completely open so we don't get trapped in restrictive circumstances.

We can simply sit in a quiet, relaxed way. It's best if we can allow our skeleton to carry our weight; so the weight of our head is going down our spine. Then our muscles relax, and we can breathe more easily. If you are wearing a tight belt, you can loosen that up. You don't need to sit cross-legged; just sit in a chair, if that's comfortable.

We have a sense that, *'In the world, there are many people who suffer, not just me. In the world, there are many people in different kinds of prisons, some in prisons run by the state, some in the prison of their own body, if they're very disabled. We all live with limitations.'*

There's a kind of solidarity in this thought. This is not to normalise suffering nor to diminish the sense of our own pain and restriction but rather to see that this world itself is not generally a state of much freedom. In the Buddhist tradition, this is called *samsara*, which means we revolve round and round and round, from one kind of limited situation to another limited situation to another limited situation.

Things can only revolve if there is space for them to revolve in. So the revolutions of habitual thought are occurring inside the very space of the mind. So when we take refuge, we take refuge in the spaciousness of our mind, which is the basis out of which all the thoughts, feelings and sensations arise, and within which all our perceptions — through our eyes, ears, nose, mouth and so on — occur.

Space is primary, and it's when we forget space that we become trapped — trapped in old habits, trapped in negative beliefs and so on.

So, first we just sit quietly and take refuge, or relax, into the natural spaciousness of our mind. Even when your mind is whirling, this whirling thought, this physical arousal, the hot sensations in the body — anger, envy, despair and so on — these are movements. They arise and they pass. What is it that they arise in? Our mind. What do they pass out of? Our mind.

What is central is to find a more direct and immediate relationship with our own mind.

## Meditation practice: calm abiding

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The first part of the meditation is to calm ourselves. We do this by focusing on the flow of the breath as it leaves the nostrils, on the sensitive skin that's just inside the nostrils. Breathing in, breathing out, in a slow, easy way. The mouth is slightly open. Our tongue is turned onto the hard palate just behind our upper teeth. Our weight is resting easily on the skeleton. We make a clear intention: *'I'm going to follow my breath.'* And as the breath comes in and goes out, that's all we're paying attention to. Everything else is irrelevant. There's a kind of freedom in this.

However, of course, for many, many hours and many years we have been following our thoughts, following our sensations. They hook us and pull us this way and that. So when we do the practice, it's not surprising that we find ourselves drifting off, getting carried away. As soon as we recognise this, we very gently bring ourselves back to simple attention on the flow of the breath. And we do this again and again.

If you have plenty of time, you can sit first of all for, say, fifteen minutes and then extend it for half an hour, for an hour. Do that several times a day. This practice is called *shiné* in Tibetan, and it means 'staying calm, being peaceful'. This is our goal.

So we'll do a little bit of this, just to begin. So breathing in and out...

[Period of meditation.]

### Energy and spaciousness

Just continue in that way. There's nothing else to do. It's a great relief, a holiday, from habitual preoccupations. There's nothing to think about, nothing to worry about. Just this very simple task. But of course we then recognise, *'Oh! Actually I prefer excitement. I prefer distraction. I prefer the sense that something is going on. Just being peaceful, there's not much there, nothing much to hold on to.'*

What is that movement of wanting to hold on to something? This grasping that says, *'I need to construct my self out of the contents of my mind, trying to get the kind of contents that I like — the sort of thoughts that make me happy — and trying to get rid of the kind of thoughts that I don't like, that make me feel sad or despairing or hopeless or suicidal?'* This is a very busy orientation. Always something to be done. Always some new kind of work to be done.

Why? Because we're not at ease. Because we see ourselves as activity.

According to the Buddhist tradition — and in my own experience I've found it very useful — we are not just the energy of our manifestation, of how we come into the world, of how our body moves, of the kind of things we say, the thoughts and feelings we have. These are all energetic, unfolding forms. They change in time; they change with situations. But we're also an awareness, an awareness which is different from thoughts and feelings and sensations. It is simply a clarity, a clarity which reveals and shows whatever is occurring.

So we want to relax into the clarity, into that openness, and allow whatever comes to come and go.

### A private garden or a public park?

If you think that *your* mind belongs to you — *'It's my possession, and I should be able to organise it the way I like.'* — then you're turning your mind into a garden. If you have a garden, you try to plant some flowers and make them grow nicely. But snails come and start to eat the plants. Greenflies come on to the roses. Birds come and shit on the plants. The neighbour's cat comes in and shits all in your special flowerbed. You can't protect the garden. If you try to cover over the garden, then maybe nothing will get in to attack the plants, but the plants not going to do very well. Plants need free, fresh air to survive, just as we all do.

So it's better if we consider our mind like a public park. In the park, dogs run around; people are chatting; someone's sitting with a can of beer, getting a bit drunk in the afternoon. All sorts of things are going on. So when we sit in the meditation, whatever comes, comes; whatever goes, goes. It's just a park. If a terrible, horrible thought arises, this is not an x-ray of my soul; it's not telling me who I really am. It's just something wandering through the mind; it comes and goes. If a beautiful thought comes, and you think, *'Oh! I need to have thoughts like that all the time'* you can't hold on the thought; it's going to vanish anyway. It's just something wandering through the park.

So we relax this personal sense of having to live my life on my own terms, of *'It's up to me, it's all up to me!'* and just allow experience to arise and pass, arise and pass. And we stay relaxed, open, available and fresh.

## By doing less, we have more

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As we more allow thoughts and feelings to go, we're not being annihilated; we're actually being enriched. This is quite a paradox, something we probably wouldn't imagine to be the case.

By doing less, we have more. The more we try, the less we end up with because actually we can't hold on to anything in life. The more we grasp, we just get exhausted, and at the end of the day, our hands are still empty.

If, however, we begin with openness and emptiness, every experience that occurs in the course of the day is fully there and then gone. This fresh, open awareness of the mind is not contaminated by bad thoughts or painful situations, nor is it improved and given more value if the thoughts and situations are sweet. They just come and go. So in this way we have more space and more equanimity. And this is the goal of the practice.

## Meditation practice: letting it happen

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So now we just sit in a relaxed way. Our gaze can be a bit open, into the space in front of us. Breathing in a relaxed way. Start by relaxing into a long, slow out-breath. And then just sit with whatever occurs. We sit like this for five minutes, and as you get used to it, you can extend the period of time. It's a period where you're present, you're here, you're alive, you're vital. But you're not on duty. You're not having to do everything, because everything is happening, as you start to see, by itself: *'Oh! Energy (manifestation) and spaciousness are not two different categories; they are not in opposition. They are inseparable.'*

So in our spaciousness, we allow everything, and we open to everything and we experience everything.

### [Period of meditation.]

It's very simple, very straightforward. You can do this if you're sitting in your own room, in your cell. You can do it if you're standing in a queue. You can do it if you're having to do some work. In any situation, just open ourselves to what is there.

And what is there, by itself, in the first instant, is simple. **We** are the ones who introduce judgment. Judgment is an unnecessary addition; it's an ingredient that this dish doesn't need.

Part of the nature of our own suffering is that we expend too much mental energy trying to make sense of things which have already shown us what they are. There is sound. There is light and colour. There's the immediacy of the world. If we just stay with things as they first appear without wrapping them in the coverings of our own intelligence, of our own interpretation, then life becomes much simpler. Doing this won't make us stupid; in fact it makes us more able to work with circumstances as they arise.

So this is the basic practice: staying with space, watching energy moving through space, so that our mind is like the open sky and the world around us is open like the sky and these two skies are moving together. Whenever we collapse into solidification — into taking up a position, going into opposition with what's around us, full of likes and dislikes — relax into the out-breath; allow this transient structure to dissolve itself, as it always does, and stay with the space.

## Sharing the benefits with all

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Then at the end, with whatever benefit we've gained from the practice, we share it out with all other beings: *'May all beings be happy.'* There is so much in the openness, there is more than enough for ourselves, for all the people we know. There's more than enough for everyone. Our nature is infinite. The nature of the world is infinite. Releasing our fixation on the finite, over-defined sense of who we are, there is love and happiness for all.

May all beings be happy! May you be happy!