

Unshackling My Chains



In my younger years, I would often wonder about the idea of enlightenment. There has been a fascination about how I could ever reach a point where my mind would merge into, or become united with, the Cosmic Mind; to acquire, to realise, or to experience, what some might call, the ultimate Truth.

But I was advised: Spiritually elevating yourself is about dropping ideas about the self... it is not about adding or acquiring. On the contrary, it is about knowing what you are NOT. Hence the only way ahead is to Know Thyself. If you seek sincerely, look deeply at your personality's filters, your attachments and fears, and you shall know better that *what you perceive to be you, is not you*; and you shall walk in the direction of true freedom.

I struggled with this. What does Freedom mean? Through a study of philosophy I encountered the true meaning of freedom in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*.

In this work, Plato warns that we are like shackled cave dwellers, entertained and transfixed by the illusory shadows projected onto the cave wall, which we believe to be the entirety of human existence; the desire to acquire more, of entertaining and gratifying our senses, seeking validation and honour, to name but a few of the illusions. But one brave cave dweller dares to break free from the chains...he turns around...and walks towards the blinding light of the sun outside the cave. As the eyes adjust to the bright and beautiful reality outside the cave, the true nature of the Self and of Reality, there is a need for the person to return to the cave, to lead others towards the Truth, despite the persecution and ridicule from others in the cave. They are conditioned to reject any other possibility, but the shadowy 'reality' created by the masters of the cave, whose interest it is to keep the masses bound and ignorant.

My struggle to identify the nature of the chains that bind me to the cave, and to break free, has begun. Over the years, I have struggled with many attachments and fears in this glorious pursuit. And for many years I suffered, as a victim, not realizing that I just had to dare to

exercise this freedom.

The loss of a high-profile job at the peak of my career had brought me down, psychologically and financially, several years ago. I began to realise the deep addiction I had to my own self-image; how dependent I was on the appearances of financial status and professional success! Hence I understood more clearly that my perception of myself was always through the eyes of others. I realised then, and now all the more, that I cannot walk towards freedom, as long as I allow myself to keep trying to 'live' up to accepted norms of external achievements or materialistic success, or as long as I yearn to appear 'cool'. This had begun a process of gradually letting go of the search for validation. I am, however, thankful for that challenging year in retrospect, because it led me to the question of my freedom, and of what gave me true happiness. Today I no longer choose to run after the image of a hugely successful entrepreneur. Instead, my interest is directed to excel in my creativity, in light of the impact of my actions as a storyteller; to find ways help create a better sense of fraternity, and human values.

My personal relationships have also bound me. My mother's death had left me shaken, for example, and I realised after years of grieving that attachments will take their time to wear off, but I made the effort to divert my attention from clinging to memories and nostalgic craving by directing my energy instead towards embodying the higher attributes and virtues that I found inspiring in her. Rather than grieve, I became more grateful for the impact of her life on me.

I also recollect how I once allowed another unhealthy relationship to continue because I feared rejection and loneliness. I introspected on how I ended up looking at intimate equations as our possessions, more as a trophy for validating our own lower egos, even when the equation may not serve any kind of evolutionary growth. Evidently, each of my relationships reflects the state of my own emotional well-being. If my ego feels superior or inferior in an area, a healthy relationship would reflect it to me, and give me an opportunity to investigate and surpass such patterns of my personality. It took me time to understand the difference between attachment and a genuine sense of love that guards and nurtures the inner freedom of all involved.

I find more chains when I go through my social media feed, reflect on my consumerist desires, and my need to buy better and feel better... It reveals how scared I am to lose the only world I know: the world of my desires, attachments, fears, social pressures, tensions, ambitions, worries, guilt, with moments of pleasure, excitement, relief.

The philosophical path, however, teaches me to organize these voices, give them each the right place, the right time and the right measure. I find that this enables me to listen to the guidance of a softer but persistent voice, which brings me back to aligning with the order of life. I realise that I have to keep asking myself which aspect of my personality needs to feel better, or feels threatened. There will be lower impulses to which I may succumb many times, but with each misstep I can exercise the ability to choose another response. While I continue to have aspirations I should never be enslaved by desire.

Similarly, I remind myself that most of my anxieties are actually negative fantasies that deter me from calmly handling my responses in the present. And I practice the quietening of the

emotional voices and direct my energy instead towards finding my inner centre, my harmonious balance.

I know that my life could be brief and trivial. But I also realize that it offers me the opportunity to recognize all those elements that are holding me back from finding deeper meaning, beyond the external chaos. For years, I have wondered about the revered German philosopher and writer Rainer Maria Rilke's line, "The purpose of life is to be defeated by greater and greater things." I guess that it means that karma will keep throwing challenges my way, inviting me to burn the delusional identification with the personality, seeking impulsive pleasure, validation and all that the ego desires. But I shall thrive with each defeat of the personality. Each wound, without the need to glorify it, may have sent me in a direction which has further pushed me to find my personality's place in the universal scheme of things and if I continue to use my intelligence and identify with a higher aspect within me, then I humbly believe that the process of unshackling my chains has begun.

I identify with Philosophy, a love of wisdom, around which to centre my Life. As all the planets revolve around the Sun, I strive to play my roles and prioritize my desires around this centre. That I feel is the idea of true freedom; the acceptance that my human identity is a process of becoming. Each one of us is a soul, shackled to a body experiencing the illusory joys and sorrows to realize the mortality of the body, to reveal the deep courage with which to transcend it. And from this centre emerge my choices and actions; the freedom to choose my response each moment, inspired by Beauty, Courtesy and Goodness, rather than to submit to vice. This is what is helping me gently unshackle my chains.