

Slavery and Spiritual Freedom

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There are two main prerequisites to acquiring spiritual freedom. One is our willingness to receive it, to enter into spiritual freedom. The other is the crucial aspect—the necessary preliminary to our being willing to accept freedom. And that is that we must *relinquish enslavement*. Indeed, as a beginning definition, we can say that spiritual freedom *is* abandoning enslavement.

Enslavement comes in a multitude of forms. We can be enslaved to a wide variety of social misbehaviors: expressions of anger and violence, power-grabbing, manipulation and plotting, deception and lying, abuse, and so on into the infinity of human viciousness and self-aggrandizement.

Addictive behaviors also are clear expressions of enslavement—addiction to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, food, sex, pornography, material possessions, purchasing (and shop-lifting), laziness, physical fitness, grooming and appearance, and so on. We can be addicted to victimization and to masochism. We can be addicted to loneliness and social withdrawal. We can be addicted to scrupulosity: the sense that even the slightest thing we do is offensive to God. We can even be addicted to religious practices, feeling that “I’d better do this, or I’ll be in trouble with God.”

In all this, at the core of spiritual enslavement is the state of isolation within the *self*. When I am isolated within my *self*, I experience just two “places” or environments. The first environment is “in here,” within my sense of my own personhood, “in here” where my “*self*” resides, where my thoughts and feelings and emotions arise and play out. “In here” is the place of the *ego*, of my sense of location, of my personal identity. “In here” is the place where I feel the hurt which I suffer at the hands of others, the pain of my own isolation, the confusion and terror of not knowing what to do or how to react to my situation, the violence that is, in reality, crying.

“In here” is the place where my inner voice, my *ego-voice*, continuously speaks, narrating to me the on-going story of myself as time unfolds. The ego-voice names the emotions I feel. It interprets the experiences I have and sets these interpretations into words. It pronounces judgment on the people and the situations around me. And it plots out my responses to these people and situations.

In contrast to the environment “in here,” the second environment is “out there.” “Out there” is “in the world,” in the world beyond the boundaries of “in here.” I find myself living and operating in the world “out there.” But I do not feel that I am actually interacting with this outer world or the people in it. Rather, I perceive that I am coldly watching the events occurring in the outer world, and when an event seems to call on me for a reaction, I spontaneously give the appropriate reaction, but without involvement, without immediacy. It is as though there is a momentary time lag between the events that occur in the outer world and my reaction to them.

And when I stop and examine the link between my environment “in here” and the world “out there,” I perceive that there is some kind of barrier or separation between my inner world and the outer world “out there” beyond the boundaries of my *self*. This barrier is not physical, but I experience it as an invisible enclosure, like a clear bubble, which places the outer world “out there” and the interior world of my *self* “in here.” The inner world of “in here” is close and familiar and comfortable to me. At the same time, I experience myself as removed from the world “out there,” and isolated within my *self* from it.

There is a set of feeling-reactions that accompanies this sense of self-isolation. These feelings may be grief, anger, self-pity, loss of control, desire for retribution, desire for power, desire to punish, and so on. These feelings that arise from my experience of my isolation within my *self* are the stimuli which move me to accept enslavement. I enslave myself to behaviors which seem to “make me feel better,” to obscure or lessen the intensity of my feelings of isolation. Or on the other hand, I undertake behaviors which give me a sense of power—a sense of exerting my *self* on the outer world in a way which has a perceivable impact. In other words, by accepting enslavement of some sort or another, I attempt to blot out the outer world, as a way of “healing” my isolation. Or else, I attempt to impress my *self* effectively upon the world which I can observe through the barrier but cannot genuinely touch.

Of course, there is another clear case of enslavement that does not seem to fit these categories. We can be physically enslaved by others, who exercise unjust power over us. But physical enslavement is a special case of these same principles. Even physical enslavement is in reality a spiritual state. As the ancient stoic philosophers have taught us, “You can kill me, but you cannot harm me.” In other words, the oppressor, because he has physical power over the victim, can put the victim in a fearful situation, in which the victim fears for himself, fears for his life, fears pain, fears what can happen to him. But it is only when the victim surrenders his spirit to the captor—it is only when the victim submits to these fears and tries to relieve them by yielding to the oppressor—that he surrenders his spiritual freedom and becomes enslaved. If the victim does not surrender to fear, then the captor can kill the victim’s body but cannot truly enslave the victim. The victim, even as he goes to his death at the hand of the captor, is still genuinely free.

The way to individual spiritual freedom, then, might begin with my identifying those things which enslave me and then releasing my grip on them. This could be a long process of self-examination, perhaps psychological therapy, and rehabilitation of my habits. But for many, there is a simpler way: interior silence.

A major obstacle to spiritual freedom is the *ego-voice*. I enslave myself to my ego-voice because I believe that this interior voice which narrates who I am to myself all the time *is* my *self*. In other words, I believe what I am telling myself about myself, and so I identify who I am with that voice which constantly chatters away, telling me the story of myself and of my interaction with the outer world.

However, if we undertake a project to calmly evaluate what our ego-voices are saying to us over time, we discover soon enough that our ego-voice is subject to the twists and tugs of our emotions, and changes its story in reaction to the circumstances we find ourselves in. Our ego-

voice is neither stable, dependable, nor truthful. If our ego-voice is our *self*, it is difficult to tell what enduring and worthy qualities our *self* has.

Moreover, if we examine ourselves interiorly, looking for the source of that voice or of the words it utters, we find that we cannot identify the origin of the ego-voice. The words simply arise and are there. Our self-examination reveals that the words either arise spontaneously from nowhere, or else they arise in a place so deep within us that we cannot observe it. Either way, how our ego-voice is attached to us, we cannot discover. All we really know about it is that it goes on talking virtually all the time, and when we worry, the voice continually cycles through the same thoughts again and again.

But in the process of this interior examination, we can make an important observation. While I try to locate the source of the on-going ego-voice, I observe that there are two processes happening simultaneously within me. First, my ego-voice is talking. The words are arising from I don't know where, but they keep coming. At the same time, I am *observing* my ego-voice. In other words, there is an observing awareness within me. This awareness is what is observing my ego-voice. As a result, there are two simultaneous operations occurring within me: there is an ego-voice talking within me, and this ego-voice is being observed by an awareness within me. There is an observer, and a thing which is being observed.

So, if we were asked, "What is a *self*?" we might easily answer: "That voice within a person which continually talks, describing the desires and threats that are perceived, planning responses to likely situations, fretting and worrying, trying to foresee the future, making judgments about the person and about the other people in the person's life," and so on. In other words, the casual answer is, "The *self* is the ego-voice which everyone can perceive within themselves."

But there is a second possibility. The other possible answer to the question, "What is a *self*?" is "the observing awareness within us" –in other words, the consciousness that simply observes or becomes aware of the stimuli that enter our awareness either from our interior world or from the world "out there." The *self* may be—and in fact, is—the conscious entity localized "here" which experiences, which "takes in" or registers what we perceive.

Why is the ego-voice not the *self*? The answer is clear: "Because it is an observable entity." In other words, the ego-voice is not the *self* because I can consciously look at it and examine it.

A little example might help here. In the early evening, my habit is to take a little walk from my home down to the shore. As I approach it, I see the lively blue of the sky and the sparkle of the water. (I am blessed!) Now, we can ask the question, "What is my *self*? Is it the sparkling water? Or is it the awareness which observes the water?" I don't think we will agree that my *self* is the water, being observed. Rather, we are more likely to agree that my *self* is the awareness that, as it were, issues from the place where my body is located and focuses itself on the sparkling water.

In other words, my *self* is not what is observed, but rather, my self is what is doing the observing. My *self* is my awareness—my simple, pure awareness—which I can focus on

whatever I please. I can focus my awareness on what is happening in the world around me “out there.” Or I can focus my awareness on what is happening in my interior world “in here.”

When I do that—when I focus my attention on the components of my interior world—I find that absolutely everything else within me can be an object of my awareness. My awareness can focus on everything else within me and see it with more or less clarity and distinctness. That includes my ego-voice. I can focus my awareness on my ego-voice and listen to what it is saying. Or I can disregard my ego-voice and turn my awareness toward some other interior phenomenon, such as my heartbeat or my breathing.

Since this is so, since I can focus my awareness on my ego-voice, or disregard the ego-voice and focus my awareness on something else, it cannot be the case that my ego-voice is my *self*. If my ego-voice *were* my *self*, then when I turn my awareness away from my ego-voice toward another interior phenomenon, my sense of my *self* would disappear. But of course, it does not. My sense of my *self* is centered not in my ego-voice but in my awareness, which I can image in one of two ways: that my awareness issues from me and pours out into the world of experience like a gushing spring emerging from the earth; or that my awareness is like floodgates, which are open and let the river-deep surge of experience cascade into me.

The ego-voice, then, is not a fundamental component of the *self*. Nonetheless, the ego-voice does have important functions. It interprets our experience for us and puts those interpretations into words which we can remember for ourselves and which we can communicate to others. It provides stability for us as we go on through our experiences by its constant companionship, as it were, talking to us, giving us advice, identifying danger. And our ego-voice verbalizes our relationships with others and articulates our prayers.

But despite these real functions, the ego-voice can be detrimental to our spiritual growth. For we almost always misuse our ego-voice by relying on it and using it too much. We can depend excessively on the interpretations of our experience that it provides, so that we can become addicted to the words without actually participating in the experiences, like a museum-goer who, when he walks up to a painting, habitually reads the name-plaque of the piece before he actually looks at it—if he looks at it at all.

In the same way, we can—and many of us do—live our entire lives within the word-flow of our ego-voices. The problematic result of doing that is that we never break out of the verbal interpretation in order to experience the perception directly. In other words, we never have the intense, immediate experience which our ego-voice is interpreting into words for us. We allow ourselves to be confined in the bubble of the ego-voice, meanwhile foregoing genuine interaction with the world of experience.

That is the source of the isolation within the *self* which we can feel. The stories and interpretations which our ego-voice tells us are actually the bubble in which we isolate ourselves from the world “out there”—the world of experience beyond our interior *self*. The barrier which we construct between the interior and exterior worlds of our experience is a barrier of thoughts, words, articulated reactions. All of these originate in the ego-voice. They are the chains which imprison us in ourselves. They are the shackles of our enslavement.

In order to control our addictive reactions to life events, we need to silence the ego-voice which yells into our inner ear and propels us into self-pity or into blaming others for our condition or into hostility and vengeance. In order to tear down the barrier which we have built between our inner selves and the outer world of experience, we need to silence the ego-voice. In order to free ourselves from our various forms of enslavement, we need to silence the ego-voice and sit in the stillness that follows. It is only in that way that we can genuinely experience our perceptions—that we can “enter life” in all its directness and immediacy.

Silencing the ego-voice is the result of spiritual discipline, and the many religions and ritual practices of the world are often aimed toward just that goal—achieving interior silence. How one might achieve silence is grist for another article. But in what remains of our time together here, let us meditate briefly on what the outcome is of achieving interior silence. In a word, the outcome is freedom.

The process is this: When I put aside my ego-voice and enter the interior silence, the haze of words and the cluttering noise which had enveloped me evaporates. The cloud of word-fog is lifted. In the silence, I find myself present in a new way in the world of the objects and people around me. Everything in my environment becomes clear and distinct in its form and color. The objects around me take on an identity of their own. Each object projects itself into its environment, as though proclaiming, “I exist!” Each object displays a vividness—the vividness of its existence, full of clear and bright color, and formed in a shape and texture that is distinct from everything around it. In this world of direct and vivid experience, the existence of each thing is unique. Every pebble declares its own existence. Every leaf is important.

And in the silence, I stand in the midst of all this—of all these existing things, so vivid and dramatic. I am no longer an outside observer. I myself am an existing being in the midst of a universe of existing beings. I am now a *participant* in existence. I am a full member of the world of experience.

I am no longer enslaved by my *self*. I no longer spend my days in interior isolation. I walk in the light of the universe aglow with vivid color, and I participate in the brilliant existence of all that is. I am free.