“From this hour I ordain myself loosed of limits and imaginary lines, Going where I list, my own master total and absolute, Listening to others, considering well what they say, Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating, Gently, but with undeniable will divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.”

– Walt Whitman, Song of the Open Road

Freedom – we long for it, fight for it and dream about it. Sometimes we also get a glimpse of this elusive being in the most unlikely of places – in the midst of a busy day, in helpless bouts of laughter, or in the long morning walk among windswept trees. For some it is a tangible goal, ironically defined by the gravity of their self-inflicted bondages and addictions. An unlit cigarette, a day without the fix, or a few inches lost at the right place – proud testimony to the freedom snatched from the tyranny
You wander all your life searching for freedom while it waits for you, within.

by Faraaz Tanveer

Cry freedom, and rejoice!

of habit. For others, it is a vague pursuit, meandering through the walkways of life looking for that passage to the beyond. It is also a great marketing tool, this freedom. The marketer reinforces our inner poverty through tricks of his trade. Creating demand is how he defines this fine art of product peddling. Then he promises to sell it to us for a price. We are more than happy to pay, delighted in our ability to buy our way to temporary nirvana. Wars are declared in its name, and people die. Freed from their bodies at last, fodder for others’ twisted moralities. What is it then, this multipurpose cloak with an elastic moral code? It is the highest goal and the lowest excuse.

“Freedom is the understanding that all sense of bondage is an illusion!” says my old friend Swami Ajay, a reclusive Vedanta teacher. He has a way of baffling me with one-liners that few can manage. Pray tell me how that is possible, I ask. “It is the fact! It is a part of your anubhava (experience) even as we speak. You just need to look
inside and see for yourself. What happens to you in shushupti (dreamless sleep)? Where is the bondage? Where is the freedom? You step into the dualistic world of creation only when you mistakenly identify yourself as an object (as opposed to the subject). Otherwise, you are always free. Even free from the concept of freedom itself,” he explains. Well, he does have a point. I have experienced the living proof of his assertions in deep meditation, but I need a more tangible view of the situation. So I ask my other wise friend, six-year-old Varun. “Freedom? Do you mean the exact meaning? I do not know, bhaiyya! I can look it up in the dictionary if you want! ….. Being free, liberty of action, unrestricted use of…” he reads out. I ask, “But what does it mean to you?” “To me? I do not care. How does it matter anyway? Can I go and play now?” says my little Zen master.

I decide to ask someone on the path, Swami Kulbhushan, a long-time Osho disciple and reputed editor, author and publisher. “What are we looking for when we are looking for freedom? Is it freedom from want, from oppression, or from self?” he asks. I am not sure, I say. He elaborates, “The first is in pure economic terms when man wants food, clothing and shelter, but he never stops at that because the basics or necessities keep on growing. Food should be wholesome and varied, clothing should be stylish and plentiful, and shelter should be elaborate. Soon the necessities become comforts and the list keeps growing until what was first a luxury becomes a necessity. This is freedom of the physical body.”

“Next, man wants to enjoy the freedom for his mind. In political terms, he wants his human rights and a host of other rights that allow him to act in any manner he wants, as long as he does not have any negative impact on others. Obtaining these freedoms has caused the biggest and the most horrendous wars down the ages. The struggle for these freedoms never ends as the mind is subjugated by those who want to rule. Finally, there is freedom of the spirit. Very few pursue it as the demands and hankering for the physical and mental freedoms consumes their entire lives.” He quotes Osho, “As long as your mind is your master, you will remain a slave. The moment you realise reality, natural freedom happens. It is necessary to understand the meaning of natural freedom. Why is it not just called freedom, but natural freedom? The answer is very subtle. There are two types of freedom. One freedom is directed against somebody. In that case, it is self-willed and headstrong. This is not real freedom, for you are obliged to take the opposite direction.”

This reminds me of another classification of the kinds of freedoms I had read back in school – freedom from, freedom for, and just freedom. The first is directed against a particular force and aims to confront. The second aims to work towards a goal, while crossing obstacles in the process. Here freedom is the byproduct of consciously directed intention. The last one refers to the sense of intrinsic freedom that all spiritual seekers hanker after. Is there a gradation apparent here, or is the value of every action measured in a unique personal context? I guess it would be easy to classify higher and lower forms of freedom, but the real measure of its relevance lies in the life in which it is lived.

The devil you know

What motivates and restricts those who seek freedom? How does it play out in our societal conscience? Dr Ann Marie Yali, a psychology professor at The City College of New York specialising in social psychology, and a fellow seeker, came up with some observations, “During the course of my work, I hear many people complain about lack of freedom. ‘I do not have freedom in my country’. ‘I lack freedom in my job’. ‘I am enslaved to my spouse’. People feel restricted and confined by external realities. It is not that people do not have any choices or free will, within these situations (even if it feels like they do not). Perhaps, it has more to do with the real or perceived consequences of making such choices, consequences that people may fear. For some, these consequences may be so dire or scary that they would rather choose bondage. For others, this is incomprehensible. “Give me liberty or give me death” (Patrick Henry 1775).”

Reflecting further, she adds, “Somewhere in
between these two extremes, there are small choices people can make to increase freedom and decrease bondage. For some, it may be that they are actually afraid of freedom, afraid of their power to choose. Perhaps, because with choosing comes responsibility, and often times cognitive dissonance. Thus, it becomes far easier on the ego/psyche to put the blame for our conditions (in this case lack of freedom) on something outside the self. In addition, there may be some sense of familiarity that keeps us in the status quo. Like they say, ‘Better [is] the devil you know than the devil you do not.’

“Any personal experiences to the effect?” I interrupt, pulling her out of her academic stance. She obliged, “Yes, I once worked in a job where everyone complained how awful it was to be there; how it was like a dysfunctional family. One woman even said she felt like a battered wife who could not get out of the situation. Indeed, very few ever left, but they continued to blame the boss for their misery. They chose to remain in bondage. A few of us chose freedom—we worked hard to find new jobs, as scary and difficult as such a change may have been! Of course, physically leaving was only one path to freedom in this situation. Another option would have been to change the perception of that working environment. To take a new thought or new perspective can be another pathway to freedom. In his letter to the Romans (12:2) Paul says, ‘Be ye not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.’ It is one of my favourite quotes.”

I am the barrier in my path. Often freedom is the permission I give myself. To step out of the if-then-else software of our psyche needs courage. If I get this job then I will allow myself to be happy, else I will be sad. If she loves me then I will love her back, else I will not. If they accept me then I will perform, else I will give up. The limiting thought patterns hardwired into our internal operating system leave no room for creativity, no door for the unknown, and no place for life to happen. No wonder life feels oppressive. We are active accomplices in this game of catch-up. “Liberty is the prize, responsibility the price,” said Dick Randolph. With freedom comes responsibility, and the frightening prospect of facing one’s own demons.
The moment of truth
Puja Malhotra, a Delhi-based positive health psychologist drives home the point with one of her favourite stories from Buddha’s life. It is said that on an occasion when the Buddha was teaching a group of people, he found himself on the receiving end of a fierce outburst of abuse from an angry bystander. He listened patiently while the stranger vented his rage, and then addressing the group, said, “If someone gives a gift to another person, who then chooses to decline it, tell me, who would then own the gift? The giver or the person who refuses to accept the gift?”

“The giver,” said the group after a little thought. “Any fool can see that,” added the angry stranger.

“Then it follows, does it not,” said the Buddha, “Whenever a person tries to abuse us, or to unfold their anger on us, we can each choose to decline or to accept the abuse; whether to make it ours or not. By our personal response to the abuse from another, we can choose who owns and keeps the bad feelings.”

Puja adds, “Others can push my buttons only if I give them the switch! If we learn to take responsibility for our choices, freedom of action is a natural consequence. Mahatma Gandhi said, ‘Nobody can take away your self-respect if you do not give it to them.’ It is the same with freedom as well, because it is created internally. To create freedom, one needs to take the responsibility of his/her response to consequences.”

Awareness – openness – acceptance is the triad she follows with her clients. She recalls the case of a well-educated professional who was trapped in the blame game. She used to feel trapped and blame all the problems in her life on the people around her – her colleagues, in-laws, husband and children. “They all want me to follow their whims and fancies,” she complained, “I have no freedom of action!” This negative thought spiral led to depression. Puja’s first task was to make her face the fears that motivated her actions and created her worldview. She realised that it was the fear of rejection that made her a people pleaser. Once the fear took over, she blindly followed its call, without pausing to examine the consequences. Now she realised that even after pleasing everyone, she was never pleased with herself. It was a vicious cycle. Gradually, through the mirror of enquiry, she started recognising the part she played in her own bondage. Now that she could see the problem, solution was not far behind. With the power to choose back in her hands, she no longer looked at others as a threat to her freedom. In fact, she found that she was more willing to accept and love them.

“Some of us have a mistaken notion of freedom. We feel we should be left free to act as we like, and consequences should be to our liking. Also, we like to take responsibility when the end result is in our favour, but if consequences are against our wishes, we tend to blame others for them,” Puja points out. Clarity of thought and the ability to look at life in the eye are the keys towards greater responsibility and freedom.

Hook, line and sinker
Sometimes the path is not as straightforward. When psychological habit lends itself to physical addiction, it shakes the very root of our sense of self. Then freedom ceases to be an abstraction, and takes on a concrete name – survival. David, now a recovered drug user, found himself in a similar situation. “I conveniently blamed my parents’ inter-religious marriage and my father’s alcoholism for my addiction and resulting negative attitude and behaviour. I considered myself a rebel against society and norms. All the while, my addiction that started with a joint of grass (marijuana) slowly progressed to drugs like mandrax, prodran as well as alcohol. I got involved with anti-social elements and was put into a lock-up, and my family had to bail me out,” he shares. His family tried everything from relocation and new medications to consulting different psychiatrists and detox centres, in vain. His physical condition also started deteriorating rapidly.

“My life pretty much continued in this manner until one day I met with an old user friend. He appeared to be doing quite well in his life; this change in him stirred something within me,” he says. His friend put him on to Bengaluru-
based Freedom Foundation, an NGO doing pioneering work in the field of HIV/AIDS and substance abuse interventions. The holistic approach applied here worked well with him and he was soon on a path of recovery. “In retrospect I realise that most of my earlier detox centres focused on treating or addressing my physical condition only, but once I was discharged from these centres I relapsed back into addictive use of drugs and alcohol. At Freedom Foundation, we were given education and awareness about addiction, especially about relapse into active addiction.”

Awareness was shone on the effects of addiction not just on the body, but also the mind, emotions, spirituality and relationship with others. The programme clarified that relapsing into active addiction is a process and not an event. He adds, “The spirituality to which I was introduced through the 12-step programme helped me in the after-care after being discharged. It helped me stay clean and progress in my recovery.” Today he works as part of the support staff at Freedom Foundation and helps others find their way through the maze he was once lost in. “I have begun to recognise that just one person can make a difference in others’ lives that in turn can bring about a change in the lives of many,” he says.

David’s story beautifully illustrates the universality of the principles pertaining to personal freedom. Recognition and responsibility, along with a holistic, contextual view of the situation always yield positive results. Just banging one’s head against the wall of symptoms does not take one very far. Sameer, a successful businessman based in Delhi came to this realisation the hard way. For years, he had struggled with his bad temper. “I used to lose it completely! A deal gone wrong, a traffic jam, or an errant kid, I never knew what would push my buttons. Later, when I used to come to my senses I was full of regret,” he remembers. It was also straining his personal relationships. He tried to intellectually reason it out but it did not help. Then one of his friends suggested Vipassana. “At first I thought, no way! Ten days of isolation will drive me crazy,” he says. However, he went.

That is where I met him. On the tenth day when the noble silence was broken, he did not talk much. “I was so fascinated by the changes
inside me, I just wanted to remain in. Vipassana helped me look at my anger without judgment. For the first time I could feel this tremendous energy welling up inside me. It was so beautiful,” he remembers. That is the miracle of awareness. What was once ugly was now beautiful. All that had changed was the vision. As we drove towards Delhi in his car, after the end of the course, we were greeted by a king-sized Gurgaon traffic jam. “Welcome to real life,” he chuckled. As he patiently waited for signs of movement up ahead, humming his favourite film song, I could sense the whiff of freedom he had tasted.

Freedom is work. We can plan for it. “Seeking freedom comes with a huge responsibility of change,” says Delhi-based psychologist Arpita Anand. “Change is stressful so most people avoid it. Those who have come to terms with this aspect of the journey have also realised the value of setting that target. They see it as something that will add value to their life. To remain committed to the process they need to be clear about the benefits as one can expect energy to run low at times. Support of friends and family is important, as this process will affect dynamics of relationships. This can be achieved through open communication. Of course, there is also the harsh reality that sometimes people give up on their pursuit of freedom as it entails a lot of effort. But re-starting the process and reminding oneself of the reasons will help.”

**The unbearable lightness of being**

What does freedom look like beyond the hue and cry of a crisis? How does one recognise it on the path? Does it come and take your hand when you are looking the other way, or do you go after its footsteps? The pursuit for freedom can itself become bondage if one is not careful. One can certainly work towards cultivating an attitude that facilitates its expression in our lives. Andrew Cohen puts it beautifully, “Under the right circumstances, it is not difficult to have a powerful experience of meditation, to taste the indescribable peace, bliss, rapture, and stillness of the ground, of being like a still forest pool, in which you sink ever more deeply, where your mind is not moving at all. It is very important to taste the inherent liberation of your own infinite depth, but that kind of experience in and of itself will not necessarily teach you how to have a liberated relationship with the chaos of your own mind and emotions. Sinking to the depths of your own self is always profoundly inspiring, but it is not enough. It is equally important to know how to stay on the surface when a storm is raging, and have no relationship with the chaos. And that is what the deliberate practice of meditation is all about. For most of us, learning to do that is ultimately a source of greater confidence and soul strength than the spontaneous experience of infinite depth. And, in fact, from an absolute or nondual perspective, being at the surface is no different from being at the very bottom of the pool. Even if it doesn’t necessarily feel that way, in time you will come to understand that it is the same. That is the secret of freedom.”

Sometimes this secret reveals itself in unexpected ways, silently seeping into our consciousness and revealing itself before us. One such beautiful moment of discovery was shared by my friend Susan Roberts, a certified Passion Test facilitator based in Florida, USA. She was sitting in her garden reading the back cover of her favourite book, Eckhart Tolle’s new book, *A New Earth*. “...Eckhart Tolle inspired millions of readers to discover the freedom and joy of a life lived in the now,” she read. She says, “The word freedom jumped out at me and I realised that yes, being present has given me the freedom that I have never before experienced.” She adds, “Sunday morning I was blessed to be relaxing on my patio finishing up Chapter 9. It was as silent as it could be when one considers how noisy nature can be. I gazed up from my book and spent the next 15 minutes totally enjoying the activities of the animals that had come to visit my small sanctuary of natural scenery. The appropriately named blue jays – striking in colour, fluttered in and out of my birdbath, and gave me so much of bliss watching them play in the water. Soon after the blue jays left, two vibrant red cardinals timidly dipped in and out of the water. Then there were the two woodpeck-
ers with the dramatic markings, black and white with the red stripe adorning the head desperately looking for the next tree to poke a hole in. My favourite, though, was the squirrel that wanted to nibble the oranges from my tree. He scampered up and down the branches, and in the process he dropped one for me before perching himself on a branch to quickly devour the skin and juicy pulp of this sunshine-bright fruit.

“I had the freedom to be completely immersed in the beauty that was there for the taking, but only if I was not distracted by my mind full of thoughts of the past and the future.” She summed up with this beautiful quotation from the Daily World journal, “By allowing the silence to lead me into a time of sacred reflection, I am able to escape the confines of any inner confusion and experience a newfound freedom.”

**Does freedom equate to choices?**

In my interactions with people from diverse backgrounds, a common thread is the dichotomy between what they think will set them free and the things that actually give them a taste of freedom. “Once I get the next promotion in a couple of years, I’ll get myself a car and apply for a home loan. I will be able to buy my kind of clothes and go to good restaurants. Then I will be finally free to live my kind of life,” says Rajesh, a young software professional in a leading IT company in Gurgaon. His mom has plans of her own, “I am waiting for the day when both my kids will be married and well settled in their lives. Then I will finally feel free,” she says. Does freedom equate to choices? Can we buy ourselves into a state of equanimity, or set deadlines for allowing us this luxury? When I asked the same set of people to remember the last time they felt relaxed and free, most of them seemed to miss the irony in their candid replies. “Playing with Gulu, my Labrador, is the one time in the day I feel light and refreshed. The weight of all the burdens lifts from my shoulders and I feel free,” says Rajesh. “Listening to old Hindi film songs is what sets me free for sure,” says Rajesh’s mom, “They transport me to another world, these songs. Then I no longer feel bound by my chores. In fact, I enjoy them even more.” Does not sound very expensive, does it? We yearn to be free from our own ego, and not from the circumstances. The situations and people in our lives, only reflect that which is inside. It is not by changing the situations but by choosing our responses wisely that our intrinsic freedom can manifest in daily living.

The materialistic view of freedom, of equating it only with the number of available choices, has led to grave problems around the world. Turning freedom into a commodity has externalised and compounded the issue. The race for resources and unequal distribution has been the cause of massive unrest and violence from time immemorial. Neo-imperialism and the petro-dollar wars are the latest outgrowths of the same worldview. Equating nuclear threats and global warming to your private quest for freedom may sound a bit far-fetched, but that is exactly what it is. It is out of our individual choices and actions that societal conscience is formed. The biggest revolution with the most far-reaching consequences is the one that happens within the individual mind. If we learn to find our freedom within, and refrain from wasting our energy in trying to grab it from others, this world would be a much safer and freer place to live in. What would such freedom look like? Paulo Coelho puts it succinctly in Eleven Minutes:

“It hurt when I lost each of the various men I fell in love with. Now, though, I am convinced that no one loses anyone, because no one owns anyone. That is the true experience of freedom: having the most important thing in the world without owning it.”

**The ties that do not bind**

Can one discipline oneself to be more accessible to such experiences? Training for serendipity may sound like a paradox but some enterprising souls do just that. With the discipline and structure of classical art providing a fluid framework, they experience a newfound sense of freedom. Discipline in this case is the facilitator, and not the inhibitor.
Dhrupad exponent and teacher Nirmalya Dey, says, “The practice of classical music is essentially based on the discipline of principle and theory of the art form. The real beauty of music is manifested when the performer enjoys the highest form of freedom born out of acquiring the knowledge and imbibing the discipline of classical music. The practice of classical music does not bind the performers on the basis of theory, on the contrary it educates people to appreciate and experience the art form with absolute freedom.”

The strong element of improvisation also provides an edge to a classical performer in terms of freedom of expression.

I think this is a metaphor for many situations in our life as well. Discipline actually facilitates freedom. Ask any serious yoga practitioner and she will tell you of the freedom she experiences in the boundaries defined by a pose. It is as if the boundaries provide a necessary context for the freedom to happen. It is amazing how a well-planned day can free enough time to pack in much more than you could otherwise imagine. The ties of a monogamous relationship, actually free energies for deeper exploration while apparently restricting one’s freedom of choice. The various gharanas of classical music, which require strict adherence to style and form, also provide a platform for improvisation and creativity. Any meditator will vouch for the fruits of a regular daily sitting. A closer look reveals that discipline is an integral part of the practice of freedom.

If freedom is our cherished value and guiding force, then all our actions fall in line on their own accord. Life finds its natural rhythm. All you need to do to find it is to look within. David Keig says it better:

Cry freedom with a quiet voice, Cry freedom and rejoice

Cry freedom see the purest light, Cry freedom with fresh sight

Cry freedom with a gentle will, Cry freedom and be still

Cry freedom till your heart does ache, Cry freedom and awake

Cry freedom with a quiet voice, Cry freedom and rejoice.