

Giving Birth to Freedom

As humans we are an uneasy mixture of light and dark. Sometimes we swing between each of them and at other times we suppress one and attach to the other. At other times we try and reconcile the two by following a regime or set of rules. And a lot of the time we deny that the dark side even exists within us. This is the trap that imprisons those who are driven by an ideology and see the darkness everywhere except within themselves.

One of the great tasks and challenges of the spiritual journey is learning to integrate and reconcile the light and dark into a dynamic whole that brings peace and gives birth to Spirit. When we come upon that state and start to live from it we experience true freedom.

For most people the problem child is the darkness within. We generally like to focus on our light side, and usually want the world to see that. Most people like to be seen as sincere, caring, conscientious, honest, loyal, generous, strong, resourceful, etc. There is quite a list of all the qualities that we like to believe truly motivate us, and we do what we can to show these to the world.

Take a moment to review your significant interactions over the past week and recognise the amount of energy you may have expended justifying yourself, defending yourself, protecting yourself, explaining yourself, promoting yourself, preening yourself or displaying yourself. Added to this is all the energy you spend advancing and defending your opinions. Generally all this effort is to project or maintain the self-image that you believe in and which you want the world to believe in as well.

Why do we do that?

And why do we feel so threatened when our brittle “positive” self image is exposed or does not stand up in certain situations?

For some reason as a whole race we have become terrified of darkness and try to distance ourselves from it as much as possible. There are those who do embrace and glorify it by acting it out. But this is not true acceptance and integration but rather a distortion that is usually a desperate attempt to hide deep pain that has been inflicted upon them somewhere along the way.

The Shadow Self

Let's take a brief look at what makes up the darkness within. It has many layers and expressions, one of the most obvious being our capacity for violence. When we look at our collective and individual histories we need to honestly admit that we seem to have an endless capacity for violence. And be aware that violence is not confined to the obvious aspect of inflicting harm onto others. There are many subtle disguised levels of violence that infect our communication, our attitudes, our thought processes and even our very lifestyle.

There is our need for power and what we are prepared to do to gain or hold power. In fact much of the structural and systemic violence we see played out in the world revolves around this very attempt to gain or hold onto power.

Then we have the whole question of our addictions. Once more there are many layers to this from obvious ones we all know about to subtle personality addictions, such as the addiction to being right, to being the centre of attention, to control patterns, to our beliefs, and of course to our self-image. And along with our addictions there are our obsessions and compulsions.

We can add to the list our capacity to live at a level we know is beneath us and yet we do it. We can all be mean, narrow minded, judgemental, malicious, dishonest, cruel, insensitive, etc.

Fear is a major component of the darkness and many, if not all, of the above behaviours are driven by fear. We have our individual variations on fear but at the core of it fear is always about one thing – the fear of destruction, or annihilation. That may be physical annihilation or the annihilation of some delusion we have become addicted to.

Denial is a significant aspect of the darkness, or the Shadow Self as it is called in mythology. Whenever we indulge the types of thinking or behaviour described above then we are already denying the spirit of wholeness, joy and compassion that is our true self. An interesting twist is that any denial of your shadow self is the shadow itself playing out. Because by the denial you are trying to keep it in the dark where it remains unconscious and therefore unredeemed.

When I explore this with people some are tempted to go into depression or guilt. Or they will challenge me that I am being depressing and that it is unhealthy to dwell on these dark morbid

aspects. This is pure denial. One of the paradoxical ways the shadow plays out is by denying that it exists, and thereby becoming resistant to any consideration of it.

So what does this have to do with giving birth to freedom? The average human is dualistic in their thinking and therefore operate within a world of duality and the conflict of opposites. To the dualistic mind the only options are either to suppress and control it or to indulge it. But neither of these options is psychologically or spiritually healthy because they leave us conflicted within and full of tension.

That is not freedom. Freedom lies along another path. It is the path of acceptance, and making peace with all aspects of ourselves – not just those parts that fit neatly into the self image we have carefully constructed.

Acceptance

The first step towards acceptance is to separate yourself from the behaviour. Most people, when confronted by their shadow, judge themselves in some way, such as I'm bad, inadequate, a failure, useless, unlovable, etc. Because the shadow tendencies have been judged they themselves are judged accordingly, and such self judgement only brings more pain and confusion.

You are not your actions – you are greater than them. For most, their shadow actions only exist because they are in pain and they are desperately trying to get their needs met. When you give way to anger, or are controlled by fear, or end up sabotaging yourself you are acting from the deep pain you hold inside. You are doing the best you can, given how you truly feel and what you have learned about life.

So that is the first real challenge I offer you. When you are aware of your shadow acting out can you accept that it is just your pain acting? Can you have compassion for yourself because of the pain you carry? To have compassion for yourself because you are simply acting out of your pain is so different from judging yourself. It is an act of love and gentleness rather than the violence that accompanies all judgement.

The shadow self is like a child that is hurt, scared and confused. We do not condemn a child for feeling hurt or scared, and yet we condemn ourselves when we feel like that. So I invite you to do four things with this:

1. Notice all the ways you judge yourself when you are aware of your shadow

2. Acknowledge that there is pain and you are simply acting from that pain
3. Have compassion for this beautiful being who is in pain and does not know how to relieve it
4. Start to forgive yourself for all of this

Compassion and Forgiveness

What happens when you start to practise compassion and forgiveness for yourself and for the world? Gradually you start to free yourself from the grip of your story. When you are attached to, and believe in, your pain and your story then you identify yourself by it. You are your story and you end up going through all the dramas of your story – reacting to what he said, worrying about what she thinks, getting angry about this or that. And it goes on and on, controlling you and destroying your peace of mind.

One of the biggest challenges is to honestly and humbly acknowledge that you have been addicted to your pain and the story that sustains it..

When you can step out of your story you have taken a major step towards true freedom. To be no longer defined by your story is such relief. You relax physically, psychologically and spiritually. You start to let go. You can let go of the past hurts and resentments as well as the worry and struggle about the future. You let go of the ego need to defend yourself, promote yourself, protect yourself, justify yourself, explain yourself, parade yourself, etc. At a deeper level you may come to the stage where you can let go the belief that there is a self that needed any of these things in the first place.

Now it becomes possible to start living in the Now – to be truly present to each and every moment. You can enjoy this moment simply for what it is without the usual demand that it be different, or the fear that it will pass.

Peace arises: the peace that passes understanding. A sense of spaciousness also arises within the mind, and this is often experienced as stillness and silence. Your awareness is actually an ocean of stillness and silence, and what you cling to as your thoughts are simply the waves that happen when awareness meets the world of manifestation. They have no reality of their own, and certainly no power. Spirit, or pure awareness, is the only power, and thoughts are simply the mold that awareness is filling in that moment.

You can then move beyond the stage of believing that you are someone experiencing stillness and silence to knowing that you are the stillness and silence. Everything else is just the process of Life giving rise to forms that come and go against that backdrop of silence that you are.

Here you are truly and infinitely free. You are the unconditioned witness of all that happens. In practical terms you are in the world but not of it. You act in whatever way is required because that is the suchness of your life, but you are not attached to how it should be. This does not mean that you become a zombie or that you let life walk all over you. In every situation you act with Right Action, whatever that may be. But you do so simply because that is the appropriate response that arises from the spacious silence, not because you are personally reacting through some attachment.

Everything is held in the embrace of understanding and compassion. You live with clear intent, knowing that life is exactly as it should be. As the Zen saying says,

“Sitting quietly by myself, doing nothing, spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.”

May you enjoy your journey into freedom