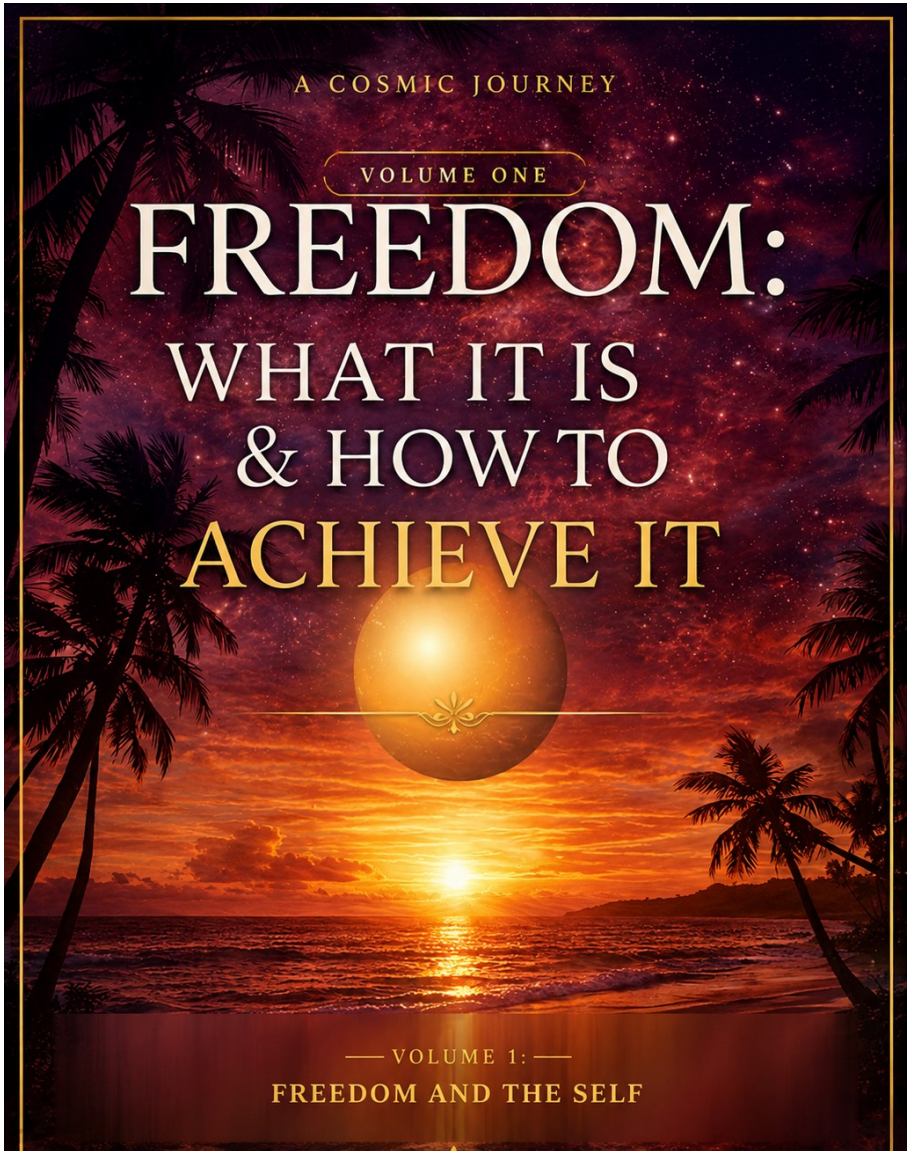




A FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

Chapter 6

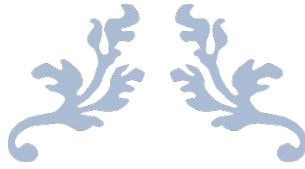
What Is This Experience Called Freedom?

Freedom is something we feel before we can define it. This chapter explores the differing avenues of freedom, the nature of autonomy, the four pillars of freedom, freedom within the structure of society, and freedom as the enjoyment of life.

It formed part of the Psychology of Meditation course Richard E. Bradshaw taught for the Osher Institute at the University of Hawaii.

Reference numbers in the text point to the notes at the end of the complete book.

[Join the discussion for this chapter →](#)



Chapter 6

What Is This Experience Called Freedom?

Thus far we have examined the nature of self-actualization, evolution, and consciousness; of who we are and where we might be going in this adventure called ‘life’. Teleological cosmologies were described that illustrated evolution from a grander scale and Idealist philosophies described a connection between cosmic and individual ‘reality creation’ processes. The basic nature of the ‘self’ was seen as a process rather than a static core of being.

How freedom might be important in the above states and processes was also described. It stands to reason that something as fundamental and vital as freedom is in so many differing contexts and environments, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual, must have its own nature, its own set of characteristics that allow it to be so versatile, in short, its own ‘personality’ and in this section, we begin by trying to find the ‘personality’ of freedom.

One aspect of freedom we spoke of earlier concerned the illusive nature of freedom, yet in spite of its illusiveness, its importance to humankind as both a tool and a metric for perceiving ‘value’ in one’s life experience. We concluded that despite its ever-present existence in our lives, it was something difficult to analyze; that a definition of freedom might range from the very tangible to the subtle and ephemeral. The complexity of freedom arises from the fact that it has as many faces as there are cultural, social, and individual realities in this world. On the individual level, for each of us there exists a unique *feel* for what we perceive as freedom, a feeling that changes from moment to moment to reflect changing inner realities (moods, mental focus, etc.) and outer circumstances. These *feelings* of freedom have both expansive and restrictive ‘movements’, i.e., connotations that relate to both inner mental boundaries (beliefs, values, expectations, etc.) and outer social and cultural limitations and *expectations*.^{cxxix}

The essence of freedom is with us in all our activities whether alone or with others, whether giving, taking or receiving freedom. Yet, except in extreme situations that demand that we focus on freedom, ours or another's, we are unaware of its presence and the role it constantly plays in the stream of experience we call 'life'. Freedom, however, is always there, hiding behind our focus upon what we perceive as the essentials in our lives. But there is reason for its 'hiding'.

In pursuit of our goals, do we realize that those goals might just be a way of embodying our need for increasing freedom, that these goals we have in life are actually 'freedom goals' disguised in the garb of socially acceptable modes of endeavor? Or when we *actively* seek freedom, do we really know what it is we're seeking, or why, or is it just a deep, yearning urge inside toward being something greater than we perceive ourselves to be at the moment? What is this quintessential feeling of freedom we all need so desperately to bask within and pursue so single-mindedly, consciously, and subconsciously as it lays hidden within our daily endeavors?

We push the boundaries of our personal freedom in our everyday activities simply in the pursuit of our daily goals yet are mostly unaware of this daily process of enlarging our 'spheres' of freedom. Every success is an expansion of our freedom, and every failure a retraction and reduction of freedom. Yet even in failure we learn and in learning expand our inner nature through understanding, and thereby increase our abilities and possibilities for future success and the increases in inner and outer freedom success brings.

Every sphere of activity has its associated freedom through which all of us individually and collectively express out innate need for expansion. Individually, socially, culturally, we are constantly pushing against that we perceive as binding us within any one sphere of activity, each of which has its own unique set of meanings and possibilities for freedom. Thus, the meaning of freedom and the specific aspect of freedom focused upon at any one time, place, or activity changes with the needs of society and the individual. This *variation* in the experience and meaning of freedom tends to hone our perception of the subtle nuances of freedom, of the many differing expressions it might manifest as, within the varying experiences in our lives. Each of these 'expressions' of freedom offer

subtle hints about our own character and who we may become and are becoming as self-actualizing beings.

Differing ‘Kinds’ or ‘Avenues’ of Freedom

Freedom might be viewed as manifesting in three general areas of human experience. The first is outer freedom which can be split into freedoms from (an outside oppression) or freedom to, i.e., the freedom to do as one chooses, if one’s expression of freedom does not impact on another’s expression of freedom. Outer freedom’ has also been defined in terms of ‘positive liberty’ which assumes societal structures and resources necessary for the expression of personal freedom, such as the right to an education and basic sustenance, and the ability of citizens to participate in politics and government. Positive liberty also assumes a ‘positive’ responsibility by each individual to help provide these rights to others.

The second freedom is inner freedom (of which I have spoken much so far in this volume), which is the freedom of an open and unconditioned mind versus a mind which has been conditioned (by personal, societal, cultural experience, and reactions to those experiences) into a specific way of thinking from which it cannot see beyond and is thus trapped within. The third freedom is freedom of will, the existence of which has been debated for centuries,^{xxx} but is generally associated with the ability to make choices and decisions in life based on one’s own values and morality, rather than one’s decisions being preordained by some higher power or authority (determinism). Granted, one’s values and morality come to a considerable extent from one’s social and cultural conditioning, but as one evolves, the effect of ‘outside’ influences on values and morality lessen and free will increases.

I posit here a fourth freedom that has to do with the infinity lying within each one of us; an infinity from which a limitless equanimity flows, an unrestrained equanimity within which the resistance of desire, avarice and fear find no footholds. This infinite urge toward the freedom of equanimity connects pragmatically and intimately with the first three freedoms, pushing them relentlessly onward in a process of evolution and more expansive self-actualization.

The first three freedoms are an expression on the physical plane of this fourth freedom, which is the illimitable nature of our primary ‘self’. It is within this context of the fourth freedom, an unrestrained, infinite

freedom, that we realize that the restraints upon, and limiting of individual consciousness are self-imposed through the process of our individual conditioning. This individual conditioning is the hypnotic trance living on the physical plane induces within our individual consciousnesses. The process of incrementally realizing that the nature of consciousness is pure expansion and that each of us are the architects of how expanded our own state of consciousness is, and that we are responsible for its restriction or expansion is the process of self-actualization and self-realization.

The Exercise of Freedom and the Nature of Autonomy

The freedom to self-actualize is context dependent. Some societies and cultures inhibit freedom or some aspects of freedom, while others are very conducive to it. Therefore, within differing cultures and societies each of these initial three levels or domains of freedom may have a variety of culture-specific expressions leading to differing ‘freedom values’^{xxxxi} and varieties of freedom. Each variation of freedom and the way it is valued by any one social milieu is an expression of specific mental paradigms, i.e., belief systems. These differing paradigms embody realities and types and levels of consciousness that result in a variety of individual expressions of freedom which in turn add to the reservoir of potential creativity of humankind.

The increasing evolution and creative complexity of humankind, individually, socially, and culturally adds to the possible complexity of flux within humankind’s cumulative actualization process and the kinds of freedom needed for that process. The wider the variability of freedom and the higher the ‘freedom value’ within any one milieu, the more potential for creativity and the more powerful the process moving toward new creative realities, including concepts of possible ‘ultimate’ realities. Thus, individual, social, and cultural variation in freedom and how highly it is valued are essential elements in both defining freedom as well as the process of growth toward expanding states of freedom.

Variation in individual expressions of freedom is directly related to *autonomy*. But this autonomy, although characterized by not feeling the need to make dependency-demands on others, is not a selfish or self-centered autonomy. It is an autonomy that derives from a freedom from self-concern allowing one’s focus to move outward in a more objective,

lucid comprehension of the cosmos one is embedded within. As such it is one of the primary platforms for a more truly efficient process of 'self-realization' for only in relation to the cosmos around us, and a truly clear and timely understanding of that relationship can we perceive our own true nature, a nature that is itself always evolving.

Conversely, autonomy and increasing self-realization negate the need for a self-concerned self-centeredness thus creating a greater sense of freedom. When focused on the self, focus, thus consciousness is restricted; only in freeing oneself from self-focus is one able to expand outward toward a more expansive state of freedom, which allows a more expansive state of empathy and openness toward others, a state of 'other-centered' autonomy.

When one engages in thought and activity detrimental to one's state of freedom, such as negative or self-centered thinking or socially unacceptable or illegal activity that restricts one's mental, social, or physical freedom, one must begin again from a lower rung on the ladder of freedom and work upward again toward the levels once achieved but lost through confusion. Through this kind of 'confused' thought and behavior one loses their autonomy, thus reducing the ability and tendency to reach out in a free and caring manner.

This 'confusion' I speak of here is the confusion about what one is, what one really needs and the most efficacious means of achieving one's needs while keeping one's needs in balance with the needs of others and society in general, for to not do so jeopardizes one's current state of freedom, both internally and externally. This is forever a delicate balancing act for many, because there are always those inner desires or outer 'forces' tipping that delicate balance into a state of confusion. Especially for those who have not achieved a high degree of will and discrimination, 'misbalancing' forces might come in the form of finding themselves being 'persuaded' by others who for one 'reason' or another want them to change their beliefs to act in ways beneficial to the persuader but detrimental to themselves.

Thus, the basic thesis is simple: Self-actualization is a *continuous process* of 1) gaining increasing freedom which 2) expands the capabilities of, and opportunities for the expression of one's free will, both of which depend on increasing autonomy, the increase of which results in increasing freedom; and in this way, the cycle continues, higher and higher. This *process* is characterized by increasing levels of *other-*

centered autonomy, inner quietude and equilibrium which allows accurate, *intuitive*, lucid perception of oneself, one's environment and those within it. This lucidity and clarity of oneself and others is highly necessary for efficient self-actualization.

Accurate perception, played out upon a platform of both *self* and *other* autonomous focus, enables empathetic interactions *with* one's environment, leading to parsimonious, harmonious relationships which with time provide the mutually nurturing setting that is most efficacious for all sentient life's optimal self-actualization. Optimal self-actualization leads more quickly to more expansive states of inner freedom and free will, *of increasing enlightenment and expansion of consciousness*. *But as I have mentioned previously, the autonomy we speak of here must be a relational autonomy, an autonomy deeply embedded within the living web of this world, connected to the autonomy of others in mutually nurturing ways.*

The Four Pillars of Freedom

Given the above, there appears to be a very direct functional relationship between *autonomy*, *moral responsibility*, *free will* and *inner freedom* all of which are intimately connected to the process of self-actualization.

Free will and inner freedom have a positive reciprocal effect upon one another, as one increases so does the other, for the exercise of free will requires an inner environment of inner freedom, the freedom from addiction to belief systems that allow one to go beyond one's presently accepted beliefs to consider other possible realities.

Expectations and obsessions (emotionally embedded, overly focused expectations) result from attachment to one's current set of beliefs, a mental state which limits one's focus, thus the content of one's awareness and in turn, the 'reality' within that awareness. Such a limited focus creates an inner environment full of mental boundaries which are effectively barriers to freedom and the exercise of free will; conversely the exercise of free will challenges and tends to break down the mental boundaries imposed by societal and experiential conditioning, increasing the amount of, and tendency toward increased inner freedom and increased ability to exercise free will.

Autonomy and moral responsibility are also closely related to inner freedom and the exercise of free will. Autonomy and moral responsibility are highly dependent upon each other. Autonomy requires that one monitors oneself so as to not impinge on the autonomy of others, for autonomy is only possible if one gives others the opportunity for autonomy. The process of autonomy requires a deep appreciation and understanding of moral responsibility, not only in terms of its social definition which will depend on social and cultural value systems, but in relation to how well one does or does not inhibit the potential of others from one's own perspective.

Free will provides the ability and propensity to be discriminating in both thought and action in regard to the potential of others. Inner freedom increases through one's satisfaction with how well one understands and expresses their moral responsibility toward others. Thus, *autonomy, moral responsibility, free will and inner freedom are intricately interdependent* variables in the evolutionary development of humankind.^{cxxxii}

There are other indications of a direct link between inner freedom and free will. If we define free will as we have above as the ability to make a decision un-swayed by mental predispositions, then the more conditioned the mind the less free will one has.^{cxxxiii} The fewer predispositions there are within the mind the greater the clarity between present mental perception and present situation.

The power of Will, which is an expression of focused, energized awareness is engaged when through need or desire the current state of affairs is willed into transformation. To change something in some way or bring something totally new into existence through an act of will is an act of creativity, therefore will and creativity are forever closely aligned. The intelligence and depth of creativity any episode of willing is capable of is directly relative to how free one is on the inside. Absolute freedom inside allows one to perceive and utilize all possible resources existing within each moment of the creative process. Absolute inner freedom, a state of egoless non-attachment which allows one to exist totally and lucidly in the present moment, unattached to previous ways of thinking, enables absolute free will and more in-depth creativity.

Conversely, the conditioning inside one's mind restricts one's creativity to only those possibilities within the confines of one's

conditioning, thus the more conditioned one's reality, the less freedom and ability to will and create freely one has.

The amount and quality of creativity in one's life has a major impact on quality of life, which, in turn helps define one's destiny. Thus, the amount of control one has over one's destiny is directly relative to how much and in what way one's mind is conditioned. How expanded or restricted the boundaries of one's conditioning is determine how lucidly one can perceive and interact with the present moment and what it contains. Since amount of lucidity is a direct product of amount of inner freedom, i.e., freedom from mental predisposition, the amount of control over one's destiny is directly relative to how much inner freedom one has, in other words, how free from conditioning one is. Thus, there is a causative, relational logic in the interaction between will, inner freedom, quality of life and one's destiny.

However, conditioning is an essential element of the process by which a spiritual being may have a physical experience. With conditioning comes the 'realities' of acculturation, socialization, and the effects and reactions to personal experience which are all necessary and inevitable products of the physical, earthly experience. Viewed from this perspective, conditioning is an important aspect of our conscious experience, an aspect which provides a set of tools for existing on the physical plane in a successful manner.

Yet, beyond this 'physical state of awareness' lies our real nature, which is essentially *unconditioned*. Thus, we have *two realities*, one *conditional* that defines and enables us to experience the physical plane of existence, and one *unconditional*, ultimate, 'real' reality. Understanding and accepting the presence of these two symbiotic, interacting 'realities', and viewing 'reality' through this dual perspective leads to a much deeper understanding and appreciation of one's moment by moment experience.

One of the characteristics of a conditioned reality is that one's awareness has been narrowed to *focus* upon *only* the physical senses, what those senses perceive and the mental constructs and concepts that arise out of the sensory experience, to the exclusion of all other possible realities.

Metaphorically speaking, this completely conditioned reality is ‘floating’ within one’s unconditioned, infinite self. Mental conceptual belief systems create the ‘boundaries’ that keep separated the two states of consciousness, the conditional and the unconditioned. This boundary is particularly strong when there is an ego-based emotional attachment or obsession to any one belief system, simply because the emotional attachment increases the energy within the belief system and its neural networks; the more powerful the energy the more powerful the boundary between the conditional and unconditional states of awareness.

The unconditional however may ‘connect’ with the conditional through practices such as meditation or sudden intuitive insights. These ‘insights’ may be evoked when experiences in the conditional world invalidate some of the basic premises upon which the belief systems in our minds are based, thus weakening the conceptual boundaries of the belief systems. This results in ‘leaks’ or ‘tears’ in the conditioned reality through which our deeper essence floods in. When this happens, we have a ‘spiritual’ experience, an epiphany.

As we grow and develop individually, to one extent or another, depending on the individual, more and more of our unconditioned, ‘spiritual’ self permeates the conditioned self, elevating the nature of the conditioned self to higher planes of realization, self-actualization and greater freedom.

The amount and intensity of ‘permeation’ or interchange between the conditional and unconditional mind continuously fluxes in response to the kind of experience an individual is going through. One might think that only positive states of mind would be conducive to a higher degree of interaction between conditional and unconditional mind, between the ‘spiritual’ self and the mundane or physically oriented self, but while positive states of mind are closer to a spiritual level of awareness, so-called ‘negative’ or challenging states can also result in spontaneous ‘spiritual’ experiences. For example, worry, depression and other feelings of inadequacy and self-concern can lead to deep soul-searching and/or appeals to ‘higher realities’ both of which may open up the conditioned mind to the unconditioned mind and produce the feelings of well-being and even ecstatic epiphany inherent within the unconditional mind.

Thus, it is that while ‘negative’ states may reduce or result in reductions in perceived or actual states of inner freedom or well-being, they are an essential learning experience in life for they not only create

impetus toward improvement in our self-actualization, but they also highlight those areas of our life that are creating ‘friction’ or imbalances. These ‘frictions’ or imbalances result in pain^{xxxiv} and efforts to alleviate the pain, which in time lead to learning and subsequent enhancement of one’s life experience.

Freedom, Autonomy and the Structure of Society

The structures of the mind are imposed upon the structures of society and culture; the structures of society are reflections of the collective minds that inhabit that society and vice versa. Each is the embodiment of the character of the other. As the mind is free or impeded, so will its resident society offer a free or impeded experience to its citizens in general. Assuming there is a free and open discourse between society, its governing institutions and the residents of that society, society itself will continue to change, reflecting the changing, expanding cumulative realities of its citizenry.

When the freedom of this discourse is disrupted through, for example, resource inequality in society resulting in divisiveness, the discourse between the people and their institutions becomes distorted and inhibited and a breakdown in communication and relevance between society, government and people occurs. This ‘breakdown in communication and relevance’ will result in society’s inability to respond to the mental, emotional and spiritual needs and/or development of its populace resulting in social chaos, and governments not reflecting the will of the people, such as dictatorships.

One major role of society has always been to help define the ‘ideal’ morality within a group of people. The socially ideal morality and the actual collective morality of its citizenry are forever in a state of tension as each goes through the process of attempting to accommodate growth in the other. This openness, and the freedom from which the openness derives is the foundation for the kind of viable relationship between people and societal structures that enhances the possibility for growth in both society and individuals within that society.

When there is something impeding the reciprocal growth of society and the people within that society in a gradual, timely manner, when the character of the people and the society they reside in become disparate,

the result is disenchantment. One good example of this is in the 1960s and 70s in America when there were mass protests against not only the established order but the policies and activities of the government which no longer reflected the feelings of the people it was supposed to be serving.

This ever-changing reciprocal process between people, society and government calls attention to the effect of increasing personal autonomy upon society and governing structures resulting from the self-actualization process. Rulers rule through control of societal resources, and people are the primary resource for any government. Without the abeyance of the people those in power lose the mandate and thus ability to rule and soon must either abdicate or agree to a dramatic change in the relationship between society, rulers and the people.^{cxv}

Increasing individual autonomy will lead to a society of self-ruled, self-ruling, self-defining individuals. In the autonomous individual, morality comes from within. As autonomy increases in the individual, the *burden* of how morality is progressively defined is balanced more heavily in the direction of the individual and less heavily toward society. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi were both examples of autonomous individuals who guided their thoughts and actions by their own inner convictions and morality and in so doing transformed the societies they existed within.

It is thus reasonable to assume that the role of ‘rulers’ in any form will diminish as personal autonomy and personal responsibility grow in humankind. This will lead to a less structured society, a society more spontaneously open to increasing discourse between all people, and a more fluid transference of ideas, which in turn will lead to a hastening of self-actualization and greater freedom on a mass scale. (This despite the anachronistic, outdated resistance of those whose minds are still buried in the past. The natural progression of individual and social evolution toward more expansive states of mind *will* leave them behind, occupying the dustbins of history.) But how will this increasing autonomy and collective enhancement in the freedom of thought and communication affect all of us on an individual level, how, and in what way will our personal experiences change? Much of this has to do with focus, creative thought, and an uncluttered mind.

Freedom and the Enjoyment of Life.

Do you want to enjoy life? Then discriminate within each moment between what is enjoyable and what is not, what is harmonious with the joy in life and what is not, what is beneficial for you and the cosmos in general and what is not.

Whether you are aware of it or not, you are constantly guiding and creating the direction of your stream of life through your persistent moment by moment discriminating decisions. These decisions are, in general, either intelligently guided, intentional, creative decisions leading (hopefully) to positive states of mind, or habitual, many times emotionally charged, unthinking decision-making often reflecting 'chronic', habitual states of mind and awareness. The habitual, unthinking decision-making can be either positive or of a negative nature. Yet, in the habituality of the process, creative thinking is missing, and creative thinking is where the joy and self-actualization lies. If you want to change the quality of your life stream, it is highly important to not let the habitual mental tendencies haphazardly learned throughout your life experience up to this point continue to obscure the potential within each moment by dictating your reality to you and thereby distracting your focus from the real contents of the present moment.

To enjoy life consistently and optimally, you must enter each moment consciously taking charge of your focus and discriminating the positive from the non-positive, for each moment will have its share of both. Positive or non-positive are *hedonically idiosyncratic*, that is, they are unique to your life experience, and the hedonic quality, positive or non-positive can only be decided by you based on your own life experience. What is good for another may not be for you, and that is why each discriminating moment is a moment only you can define and decide how best to use the potential within it.

By taking charge of your focus, of what your awareness is centered on, you can transform the character of the life stream you inhabit toward an experience persistently beneficial for yourself. As you transform your stream of life, keep in mind that your stream of life is happening amidst many other streams of life and the nature of your transformed stream will attract others of the same nature. Thus, the nature of your stream of life

will be reflected back upon you by the social milieu you are currently moving within. As you transform the *quality* of your stream of life, it will be buoyed toward a surrounding ambience of similar quality in that ocean of all possible experience.

Of course, what you perceive as positive and not positive depends on your reality, your momentary inclination and how *lucidly* you perceive this forever on-going process of willful discrimination within each moment of your life. Attitudes are indeed contagious, anger attracts anger, and joy attracts joy. Assuming you have discriminated toward the joy in life, your stream of experience in life will slowly transform until it is mostly the positive that surrounds you and fills each moment with joy and well-being. Even in those times when what might be construed as negative comes crashing into your 'reality', a positive attitude will help transform it into something beneficial to both yourself and the other, if only in the learning that comes out of the experience.

As you develop your life stream's character, more and more it will be filled with only that which you willfully discriminate it toward, and that you fill it with through your discriminating willpower, thus weakening habituality until it disappears. As you are discriminating the good within each moment, embed yourself within that moment only, by focusing upon it and filling your awareness with it. It is in this way that you may optimally enjoy the stream of that moment that you yourself have created, that you have molded through your discriminating awareness, whatever endeavor you are engaged in.

This is the real experience of autonomy; of being in control of yourself, aware of yourself and aware of the *potential* within each moment in relation to both yourself and your environment; by taking up the mantle of self-rule and molding yourself within each moment toward that you perceive as sublime.

And now the most obvious; to lucidly, willfully discriminate each present moment as it happens, you must reside within each moment *as it happens*, always being right here, right now, for within the present moment is the *only chance* you will have to discriminate that which exists within the present moment, not within memories of the past or dreams of the future, but *right now*. Believe me, there is enough happening within the present moment to keep you busy *forever*. And the change you create within each moment is the chariot of self-actualization you are riding within, toward a state of total freedom and unrestrained expansion

Freedom and the Self

within the forever now. What a roller coaster ride! And that brings us to freedom and beauty.

[Join the discussion for this chapter →](#)

Continue the journey

This chapter is one of fifteen in Freedom & the Self, the first volume of Freedom: What It Is & How to Achieve It. The complete book follows the thread from the evolution of consciousness to the nature of the self, the experience of freedom, and how to live it day to day.

Volume 2, Freedom & the Collective Path, carries the same inquiry into relationship, society and our shared future.

Get Volume 1: Freedom & the Self

Get Volume 2: Freedom & the Collective Path

Explore the Freedom Series

All books by Richard E. Bradshaw, PhD