

What is Freedom?

This question begs the question: “What are we seeking to be free from?” The first thing that comes to mind is just being free from the mechanistic quality of our conditioned responses. We've all heard the term “pressing someone's buttons,” and have elicited a predictable response from a person. That's very mechanistic, right? We know the touchy spots of people close to us, so we can say a certain thing to get a certain mechanistic reaction. This is just conditioning, generally from early childhood.

We learn certain forms of behaviour, certain things that were self-protective, things that we saw could manipulate other people, etc. And we've maintained that conditioning into adulthood. But we can sense into when we're being mechanistic and when we react in predictable ways that aren't really appropriate to the situation. When we respond excessively, with anger, or with defensiveness, these are all indications that we're acting out of conditioning. So, the question is, “Is there anything about us that's unconditioned?” I'd suggest that the one and only thing is not really a thing. It is our awareness, our consciousness.

We can notice this conditioned behaviour but what notices it is not conditioned. If it was conditioning trying to notice other conditioned behaviour, then there wouldn't be enough perspective to really see it. When we see ourselves acting out of conditioning, rather than condemning, blaming or judging ourselves, or saying “so-and-so made me do it,” we can see that as an opportunity to notice our own conditioning. That noticing has power, because what notices it is the unconditioned; it's beyond the conditioning, and that recognition is the secret to becoming free from that conditioning.

It's not that the conditioning is going to disappear overnight; it may never. That's the power of it. But the difference is we can be less and less controlled by it. We can see it arising up. “There it is again: me being shy again, me being demanding again,” or whatever. But what notices that is already free, is already the unconditioned. It's very valuable to see that the unconditioned is already present. It's not that we have to practice being unconditioned; it's not that we have to act out of character in order to balance out this conditioned behaviour. It's really just noticing that, yeah, conditioned behaviour exists, sort of like a computer when we first buy it before they load all the software on it. The software is the conditioning.

Conditioning is something that was adopted, innocently. We can see it without judgment; we can see it from the sense of spaciousness. We can allow it to be there. It is there, so we can allow it to be there, and we can see it from this perspective of noticing it without judgment – allowing it to arise. We become more conscious of it and, over time, less and less reactive to it because we begin to understand how and when it arises.

That's really the freedom. It's the freedom to begin to function from our non-conditioned nature, to respond appropriately to situations. And that's the freedom to be ourselves in this world.