

10 STEPS TOWARDS INNER FREEDOM

A 10-MINUTE READ.
A LIFELONG PRACTICE.

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The Kingdom within
.blog

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A ROADMAP FOR SELF-DISCOVERY

*I cannot teach anybody anything.
I can only make them think.*

~ Socrates

This physical world is one of transient forms. Thoughts, seasons, relationships, nations, institutions, emotions, bodies, possessions — it's all bound to pass in time.

Clinging to fleeting shadows will always result in misery.

What options do we have? Where can we stand? Does non-attachment rhyme with indifference, detachment and material renunciation? Can we enjoy the evanescent nature of this world without getting caught up in it?

This little handbook is designed as a roadmap for self-discovery. The intention is not to proselytize. After all, breathing doesn't require any belief system. Instead, this book's purpose is to share useful perspectives that can help us deal with our human predicament. To know more about these ideas and the philosophies they're inspired from, the reader can visit *thekingdomwithin.blog*.

May these ten pieces provide you with food for thought and tools for the journey.

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CLINGING TO A WHEEL

My whole life is just a long series of losing things I love.

~ John Dutton, Yellowstone

By clinging to a wheel, one's bound to get crushed sooner or later. If we cling to summer, we suffer when summer ends. If we're attached to life, we suffer when the Grim Reaper rears its head. Clinging to a relationship results in pain when that relationship changes or lapses. There's no escaping the mutable nature of the physical world.

Life teaches us that our attachments lead to suffering. We naturally form attachments with material forms (body, possessions) but also with psychological forms (stories, concepts, opinions). All of these are subject to change, despite our best efforts to keep them as such. As Thich Nhat Hanh points out, *it is not impermanence that makes us suffer. What makes us suffer is wanting things to be permanent when they are not.*

Living amidst transience can be tricky. If everything is falling apart, what can we hold on to? Must we become renunciates, retire to a cave, and shun the sensual pleasures

of the physical world? How can we partake in the dance without getting caught up in it? If all relationships have an expiration date and are bound to make us suffer, why initiate any relationship at all? How does one experience pleasure, knowing that it invariably leads to pain? How does one become free?

As the Zen teacher lifts his cup of tea, he notes, '*To me, this cup is already broken.*' Having said that, he takes a sip.

IMPERMANENCE AS A TOOL

Le temps détruit tout.

~ Gaspar Noé, *Irréversible*

[Desire + attachment + impermanence] = the triangle of misery.

Not getting what we want makes us suffer. Getting what we want also makes us suffer since it's all impermanent and will eventually lapse. Either way, we always suffer. Bummer.

The good news is that impermanence works both ways. Ocean waves arise - roll - abate. Sound waves open with an attack, followed by decay, a sustain, and a final release. Likewise, all forms follow the same arc. Emotions included. Happiness is transient, but so is sadness.

When the inner current gets rough and you're caught under an emotional wave, be still. Drop the fight or flight instinct. Let it pass through you. Instead of milking the drama, make peace with the emotion's presence. Repeat these four words: *this too shall pass*.

Have you ever had to deal with a child's tantrum? Strong

emotions act in a similar way. Ignoring or resisting them only amplifies the hysteria. Instead, sit down and address the child. Look him/her in the eye. Once the emotion senses it has your full, undivided attention, it shifts. Hold the focus for as long as it takes, and let the emotion follow its course.

Labels such as ‘depression’, ‘fury’, ‘anxiety’ sound dramatic. While these states might be accurate, conceptualizing them as such doesn’t always help. Instead, break emotions down into simple physical descriptors: a weight on the heart, a heaviness in the body, a tugging on the jaw, tense shoulders, etc. There’s no need to turn these simple physical sensations into a story.

The less you cling to emotions > the less the mind dwells on looping thoughts > the less you suffer. Let the pain flow through you. Grant it your full attention and make peace with it. It’s there, and it will eventually pass. Remember that *fog always lifts*. That’s how you weather the storm.

Once you’re comfortable with that flow, you’re free.

SAND CASTLES

What is it that dies? A log of wood dies to become a few planks. The planks die to become a chair. The chair dies to become a piece of firewood, and the firewood dies to become ash. You give different names to the different shapes the wood takes, but the basic substance is there always. If we could always remember this, we would never worry about the loss of anything. We never lose anything; we never gain anything. By such discrimination we put an end to unhappiness.

~ Swami Satchidananda

In a world of impermanence, all forms are disintegrating. Is life continual loss? What can we hold on to? Where do we stand?

Bereavement can be devastating. Pain is a natural part of the grieving process.

If you look closer, you'll notice that attachment is an additional layer to grief. Processing pain can be done without clinging to suffering. The physical descriptors are the pain. The story — 'burnout', 'depression', 'bereavement' — you apply to those descriptors adds to the suffering. Suffering, from that perspective, is just another form of attachment.

Many attachments stem from the fear of losing something.

But ownership is a concept. We can't lose anything we don't own, and we don't own anything. 'My wife' and 'my car' are concepts. Physical forms appear, then vanish. The process can hurt. But it's the attachment to the concepts that produces the suffering.

If impermanence is transition, then death is an illusion. Waves don't die — they return to the ocean. The essence of a room is space. Remove the walls, the space remains. A child builds a castle in the sand. Stomp on the castle, no more castle, the child cries. But was there really a castle? Or just a concept the child grew attached to?

As he was transitioning, Ramana Maharshi's devotees conjured him, *'Please don't leave us!'*. The Indian sage looked at them and answered, *'Don't be ridiculous. Where would I go?'*

THE LIGHT HEART

Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly.

~ G.K. Chesterton

In the Book of the Dead, Egyptians weigh the souls of the departed. Have you put your heart on the scale recently? How heavy is your load?

Gauge the mental baggage you haul around: opinions, prejudices, narratives. If that load had substance, it would be a miracle to be ambulatory. Imagine letting go of it. How light would you feel?

When we watch a film, we get sucked into the screen and lose ourselves in the fictional world of the story. Likewise, we get hypnotized by our own thoughts. Our mental activity is a Wonderland. Each thought is a white rabbit.

Most of the time, we're like Alice: we follow every rabbit down the hole and get lost in the thought stream. The deeper the hole, the heavier the heart. But we needn't follow every rabbit. As we step back from thoughts, we come back to our senses. Only then do we wake up.

Opinions place us in a conflictual relationship with the world. We're continually caught between two poles — *how the world should be* VS *how things are*. Once we drop the [opinions + prejudices + narratives], our heart lightens. We can then appreciate nature as it is: an integrated process of immense complexity. Judgments such as 'good' or 'bad' become irrelevant in the grand scheme of things.

Remember '*Trainspotting*'? Try thought spotting. Sit back and watch the mind at work. An opinion arises? Watch it fly by. Come back to the present moment. You are not the mind. Those opinions are not 'yours'. It's just traffic on the mental highway.

When's the last time you smiled? Or had a genuine laugh? Watch '*Breakfast At Tiffany's*'. Treat yourself with the lightheartedness of Holly Golightly. The lighter the heart, the more enjoyable the ride.

THE PLEASURE DOME

There is nothing wrong with entertainment. As some psychiatrist once put it, we all build castles in the air. The problems come when we try to live in them.

~ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

Let's watch a series. Let's get some ice-cream. Let's go clubbing. Let's go on a trip. Let's check our feeds. Let's get together. Let's gossip. Let's get drunk. Let's have sex. Let's watch the game. Let's buy tickets for... The pleasure pursuit never ends.

Our culture conditions us to seek happiness in the 10,000 things of the material world — food, products, apps, sensory pleasures, objective experiences. As soon as emotional discomfort arises, we seek refuge. We fill the void with distractions.

How is that working out for you?

Unfortunately, pleasure-seeking isn't sustainable 24/7. When that strategy falls short, we're faced with a choice: Do I want to get high? Or do I want to become free?

Attachment to pleasure = aversion to discomfort. As soon as we feel bored, anxious, or sad, we grab our phones.

We snack. We distract the mind. Pleasure isn't evil; it's just highly addictive. How would it feel to break free from those addictions?

Try catching your next hankering before giving into it. Emotions behave as waves. They have peaks and troughs. Snacking isn't hunger. It's boredom. Who's claiming food? The body or the mind? If you skip a meal, hunger won't increase exponentially. It abates. Ditto for thoughts. Ditto for emotions.

As we allow the discomfort to pass, we gradually break the conditioning. We're no longer junkies. We build resilience. We get stronger. Instead of addictions, pleasures remain pleasures.

THE ACTOR BEHIND ALL ROLES

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.*

~ William Shakespeare, As You Like It

The world's a stage and people are merely players. If that's so, are we living life accordingly?

We spend our lives playing roles — at home, at work, in daily situations. We believe that these roles are who we are. But roles are just concepts. They're functional. They're set to lapse. Once we grow attached to roles, impermanence becomes an enemy.

Welcome to central casting. Which role are you playing? The company manager? Who will you be when you retire? Or switch jobs? Or leave your job?

Are you the caring mother? What will be left of that role when your children move away?

Are you the beautiful young woman? So was Carrie Fisher (Princess Leia, Star Wars). When Fisher was slammed

by film critics for her physique as an elderly woman, she quipped '*My body hasn't aged as well as I have.*' The actress knew that the 19-year-old Princess Leia wasn't who she truly was.

Let's distinguish role and function. When you play Monopoly or a video game, your avatar is functional. Do you identify with it? Probably not.

Likewise, an artist working at McDonald's doesn't define herself as a fast-food employee. She knows that her function at a food joint isn't who she truly is. But can she drop the attachment to her self-conception as an artist?

Once we peel away these roles, who are we? Beneath the layers lies a core — an essence. To feel it, be still and quiet the mind. Can you sense the peace underneath the mental activity? Can you feel that underlying current running through your body? That's the great actor behind it all.

As we return to the stage and perform from that perspective, acting and impermanence become a joyful playground.

OUTFITS & OPINIONS

*Many people suffer because they are caught in their views.
As soon as we release those views,
we are free and we don't suffer anymore...
When you get free from views and words,
reality reveals itself to you, and that is Nirvana.*

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

Opinions are like coats. Coats are useful. Coats keep us warm in winter, they keep us dry in the rain. We enjoy their texture. We love their look. We have various coats for various occasions. Coats are great.

Now, enter a movie theater and remove your coat. Don't worry, it's safe. You can put it back on at the end of the film. Can you let go of those opinions, only for a moment? *I can't remove this coat! This coat is who I am! Who will I be if I take it off?* Try and see.

Opinions help us feel protected. Helmets, like opinions, make us feel safe. But the helmet hinders our ability to hear nuances. The more helmets, coats, and opinions we adorn, the more distorted our perception of the world becomes.

This is my body, this is my background, these are my opinions. This is who I am. If you feel tethered to your

body, try an out-of-body experience: watch a film, listen to a story. By experiencing the world through the eyes of a protagonist, stories provide us with understanding and vicariously teach us compassion.

The ability to juggle various perspectives requires not being attached to any of them.

Clinging to your heavy coat in a warm movie theater will probably ruin your experience of the film anyway. Narrow minds are uncomfortable places to linger.

THE LITTLE WAVE DANCES

*At the still point of the turning
world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the
still point, there the dance is*

~ T.S. Eliot

We cling to the past. The past provides us with a story. Stories give us a sense of identity. Our stories hold together the illusion of an entity separate from the whole. *This is who I am; That is who you are; This is the way it is.*

Narratives have imperatives. Stories need to make sense. A story requires a beginning, a middle, and an end. With the illusion of *self* comes the illusion of a *life*: past, present, and future. If life is framed as discrete, individual stories, then each narrative requires a meaning.

To find that meaning, we adopt models of what a life should resemble: marriage, a career, a family, a dog, and a house with a white picket fence. We then pit everything against that model.

Based on that judgment, life events are deemed ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. Once we’ve suffered sufficient blows, we

deem life meaningless. Or absurd. Or cruel. Or unfair. We lose the sense of the whole.

Children are said to be born with an *oceanic feeling*. If the ocean were to discriminate between each wave, each wave would require a meaning. What meaning would that be? From the wave's perspective, life might seem meaningless. From the ocean's perspective, there would only be an all-encompassing unity.

Instead of a story, let's consider life as a dance. When we dance, there is no past. No story. No future. No aim on the dance floor. No meaning assigned to wiggles and moves. *What's your plan? Where are you going? What is the meaning?* These questions cease to operate. *None of this makes sense!* We've relinquished the need for a narrative. We've stepped out of the mind's attachments.

LOVE WITHOUT ATTACHMENTS

*Peace and happiness are the nature of our Being.
We share our Being with everyone and everything.*

~ Rupert Spira

You complete me. I need you. You make me happy. Let's flip those romantic statements. Without you, I'm incomplete. Without you, I'm in need. Without you, I'm lonely and miserable. According to romance, we're lonely, needy, miserable creatures. What a sad vision of humanity.

Consumerism conditions us to seek happiness in the external world, namely in relationships. Once we encounter a being who provides us with joy, we immediately latch on to this person. *Let's make a vow to never leave each other.* It's a transaction: *I'll love you if you love me. I'll be what you need me to be if you'll be what I need you to be.* Dickey proposition.

Instead of seeking fulfillment in the outer world, what if peace and happiness were the nature of our Being? *I'm depressed. I'm lonely. I'm miserable. How could happiness be the nature of my being?* Remember impermanence?

Emotions come and go. Cells die. New cells are born. Opinions change. Roles evolve. What remains? In the words of T.S. Eliot, *the still point in the turning world*.

I am sad. I am lonely. I am in love. I am happy. I am depressed. I am anxious. Notice a pattern? The states switch, but the ‘*I am*’ remains. That’s the actor behind the roles. The witness behind the transience. The screen on which all fleeting states are projected. Underneath the layers of mental activity lies a peace that passes all understanding.

When individuals come together from that perspective, they celebrate their shared beauty. No lack, no loneliness, no misery. Love is no longer extracted and extorted from the external world. It’s no longer something that you take. You radiate Love from within.

LETTING GO

The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.

~ Albert Camus

How serious is this game? We cling to hopes, mull over the past, dramatize hypothetical outcomes. But does anything really matter? Here we are, hairless monkeys stuck on a rock spinning in space. We live a handful of years between the maternity ward and the graveyard. That's a blink of an eye compared to the four billion years of this planet. We'll soon be gone. Why waste a single minute in misery?

Just do the best you can at what you are doing in this moment. Let go of expectations. Release all attachment to outcomes. Enjoy the action, the process, the unfolding. If you give everything your best shot, what regrets would there be to have?

Attachments stem from fear. Fear of change, fear of loss, fear of losing control. Peace arises as we realize that there is nothing to lose, nothing to gain, nothing to cling to. Freed from our baggage, we live comfortably with the flow of change. No past. No future. No clinging. No suffering. We

embrace the dance.

Shepherd your attention back to the here and now. Once you let go of passing thoughts, the sky clears up and your light shines through. By repeating this practice throughout your days, you break the addiction to the external world. You reconnect with the peace at your core. Needs and attachments gradually dissolve.

This book opened with a question: *in a world of impermanence, where can we stand?* Here are three options.

Option 1: stand in the middle of the river, of the mental traffic, and be carried away with every thought/emotion/judgment/hankering.

Option 2: sit on the river bank and watch the stream go by from a distance.

Option 3: remove the illusion of *self* with its drama and its narrative. There is no self, no story, no river, no observer. Feel your Oneness with the whole. All that's left is a bag of air, a stream of thoughts and emotions, and a soft, abiding presence. *Inhale. Exhale. Rising. Falling.*

No past. No future.

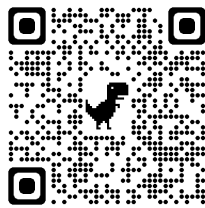
Just a bag of air.

Just a presence.

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