



34 – Freedom

“Within us there is a silence as vast as the universe. We long for it, and once we touch it, we will never again be content to be half-alive.” ~

Veronica A. Shoffstall

“Freedom is not something you acquire. It is the absence of the compulsion to grasp or resist; it is the opening of a space where life can unfold.” ~

Stephen Batchelor

The possibility of peace

Resting in awe and wonder

Welcome to the third stage of our RAFT to Freedom journey. Having navigated the first stage of ‘Recognising’ the landscape of human suffering and engaged deeply with our second stage of ‘Abandoning’ the craving that fuels compulsion – we now arrive at a profoundly hopeful and pivotal stage.

The third stage invites us to turn towards the ‘F’ in RAFT – to actively experience ‘Freedom’. This entire stage is anchored in Gotama (the Buddha’s) third realisation that freedom from craving and compulsive patterns is possible – we can personally experience this liberation by actively recognising and familiarising ourselves with moments of clarity, peace, and non-reactivity.

After clearly recognising pain, difficulties and disappointments and that avoidable suffering arises and is intensified through craving, Gotama offered this liberating message – an end to this unnecessary distress is truly possible. This isn't merely a philosophical idea; it is presented as an attainable reality to be personally experienced and verified in the here and now.

Familiarise ourselves with freedom

In this third stage of our journey, the practice shifts from the effort of ‘recognising’ and ‘abandoning’ to the gentle art of familiarising with ‘freedom’. We are no longer trying to fix the mind or fight the waves, instead, we are training the attention (the Captain, Navigator, and Crew of our vessel) to notice,

recognise, appreciate, and intentionally dwell in the moments when craving, aversion, compulsion and confusion are absent. We make the shift from ‘doing’ to ‘being’.

Freedom often appears first as a stopping – a hush where wanting and pushing are absent. The secular Buddhist author and teacher Stephen Batchelor describes this as “seeing the stopping of reactivity”. It is the clean interval between a sensory trigger and the old reaction – the single breath where nothing has to be added or pushed away.

Alongside the traditional formulation of Gotama’s third realisation, Stephen Batchelor, reframes the ‘Four Noble Truths’ as four tasks: to embrace life, let reactivity be, see reactivity stop, and ‘Act’. Seen in this way, the third task – the third stage of our journey – is the invitation to recognise and dwell in the stopping of reactivity – the still point, or ‘hinge’, where we pivot from reaction to response.

The ‘Seven Supports’ that we will be exploring later within this stage of our journey, can be understood as attitudes and activities that help to us to dwell within this still point: the supporting factor of ‘Liberating Mindfulness’ notices the freedom, ‘Penetrating Inquiry’ turns curiosity towards it, ‘Enthusiasm’ sustains it without strain, ‘Energising Joy’ confirms it with a clean uplift, ‘Deep Calm’ settles the body-mind, ‘a Unified Mind’ gathers and focuses the attention, and ‘Balance’ provides even-looking stability. From this quiet *hinge*, we naturally move into ethical engagement in the world, choosing caringly appropriate responses rather than being driven by old patterns and habits.

In our ‘RAFT to Freedom’ metaphor, the third stage is unfurling the sail. Having enhanced our basic raft (‘Abandoning’) and steadied the keel (the ‘Five Defenders’) in the second stage of our journey. We now unfurl the sail to catch the winds of peace, ease, and liberation. We stop dismissing moments of calm as boring and insignificant, and start recognising them as glimpses of the ‘safe shore’.

Navigating the conditions of freedom

As we familiarise ourselves with freedom – the ceasing of craving, aversion and compulsions – we discover that freedom is not a static destination but a dynamic balance. The sky of the mind is vast and clear, but it is subject to the

‘weather’. In the coming chapters of this third stage of our journey, we will map the two distinct forces that influence our journey through these waters:

- ★ **The ‘Five Hazards’** (traditionally known as the Five Hindrances): These are the unpredictable storms of ‘Sensual Desire’, ‘Ill Will’, ‘Tuning Out’, ‘Anxiety and Agitation’, and ‘Immobilising Doubt’ that obscure our view of the safe shore and turns us back towards harmful cravings, aversions, compulsions and reactivity. They are the dangerous hazards marked on our navigational map.
- ★ **The Seven Supports** (traditionally known as the Seven Awakening Factors): These are the antidotes to the ‘Five Hazards’, the specific skills of ‘Liberating Mindfulness’, ‘Penetrating Inquiry’, ‘Enthusiasm’, ‘Energising Joy’, ‘Deep Calm’, ‘a Unified Mind’ and ‘Balance’ that we cultivate to counter the storms and keep our vessel steady.

Traditionally, these ‘Seven Supports’ are known as the specific antidotes to the ‘Five Hazards’. When the fog of ‘Tuning Out’ rolls in, we do not drift helplessly; we counter it with the support of ‘Enthusiasm’ and ‘Penetrating Inquiry’. When the waves of ‘Anxiety and Agitation’ rock the raft, we stabilise it with ‘Deep Calm’ and ‘Liberating Mindfulness’.

By learning to apply the specific support that balances the specific hindrance, we keep the sail of Freedom full and our course true. But first, we must learn to recognise the feeling of the wind itself.

How to recognise moments of freedom

Freedom is practical and in the present-tense: it is the absence of craving, aversion, compulsion and confusion (reactivity) that can be recognised in this present-moment and then kept open long enough to guide the next step.

- ★ **Notice the stopping:** Pause the moment you realise that the compulsion to grasp or resist has subsided. Sense the relief that follows – the widening of space, the softening of tension, or the return of breath.
- ★ **Rest in non-reactivity:** When the impulse to fix, grasp, or resist subsides, stay present in the ‘Deep Calm’ that remains. Let awareness dwell where nothing needs to be added or removed.
- ★ **Value subtle ease:** Do not overlook small, unremarkable pauses of neutrality, ease, or non-craving. These are not boredom; they are the living

texture of liberation.

- ★ **Use the space:** When a harmful compulsion arises, look for the space between the contact and the reaction. Choose ‘Liberating Mindfulness’ and ‘Penetrating Inquiry’ instead of engaging with old stories and narratives.
- ★ **Apply if-then plans:** Enact a pre-decision, for example, “If agitation arises, then I will take five breaths at the doorway” to maintain the ‘Deep Calm’.
- ★ **Surf the wave:** Feel the feet and breath, watch the urge wave rise and fall, and act only after the peak passes, replacing reflex with choice.
- ★ **Distinguish familiarising from striving:** In this stage, our practice shifts from striving to familiarising. The task is no longer to achieve peace but to recognise and dwell within it. When we grasp at calm or chase ‘special’ experiences, the grasping itself becomes another form of craving. Instead, we return again and again to a light curiosity: “What does ease feel like right now?” Familiarisation is gentle repetition rather than heroic attainment.
- ★ **Integrate wonder and joy:** As reactivity quietens, the ordinary world begins to feel more immediate. Colours can seem brighter, sounds more vivid, and the heart more tender. This is the natural joy that arises when the mind is not constantly filtering life through craving and aversion. Let yourself be touched by this quiet sense of wonder – the simple awe of being alive and aware. Such joy is not excitement but appreciation; it confirms that freedom is inseparable from gratitude.
- ★ **Stop, pause, linger and savour:** Remember to remember to interrupt the momentum of *doing* and *notice* the ‘everyday sublime’: the simple clarity that appears when craving, aversion, and confusion are momentarily absent. Let the pause reveal a space where nothing needs to be added, fixed, or taken away. Linger in this unforced ease long enough to become familiar with its perspective – the quiet fullness of experience when the mind is not grasping or resisting. Savouring these moments strengthens the ability to directly experience and to personally verify, to dwell in freedom rather than merely touch it.

“... the term that I currently use is that of ‘the everyday sublime.’ I feel the sublime is not reducible to magnificent sunsets and vast views of the Himalayas. ... If you look carefully and mindfully at the tiniest detail of what’s going on, that is just as awe-inspiring as the stars in the night sky. When you look at a leaf or a blade of grass – very Zen,

I suppose – that’s the sublime. The sublime has to be here and now.”
~ Stephen Batchelor

★ **Align with ethics:** Genuine freedom is not cold detachment but a peace that expresses itself through harmlessness. As the heart steadies, sensitivity to the well-being of others naturally deepens. Notice how serenity expands when your actions, words, and intentions are guided by kindness and integrity. A mind free from avoidable regret and ill will is a mind more able to rest at ease. Living harmlessly is one way we embody the stopping of reactivity in ourselves and the world.

Practice to explore: See the Stopping: Sit or lie comfortably. Feel the weight of the body and allow the out-breath to lengthen slightly. Let sensations, thoughts and sounds come to you rather than going out to meet them. Notice any moments where grasping or resisting are absent, where contact is simply noticed and nothing needs to be done. Softly name this absence to yourself (‘freedom’, ‘peace’, ‘stillness’, ‘ease’). Linger there for three breaths.

If agitation builds, feel the contact of your feet or hands and widen the attention again. In this way, you learn to recognise the moments of freedom from craving, aversion, compulsion and confusion, and to trust the stillness that can hold both your own experience and the ‘cries of the world’ with compassion.

Self-reflections:

- ★ Can you recall moments, however brief, during your journey where you felt a sense of peace, ease, or freedom from compulsion? What was that like?
- ★ What does the idea of ‘cessation of suffering’ or ‘freedom’ truly mean to your unfolding experience? What qualities does it entail?
- ★ What obstacles arise when trying to notice or appreciate moments of peace (for example, restlessness, disbelief, waiting for something 'bigger')?
- ★ Which ‘If-then plan’ (prepared when calm) would save me most trouble this week, and where will I keep it so that I actually use it?
- ★ What moments most lead to awe and wonder – seeing the everyday sublime – and how might I intentionally weave more of them into my day?
- ★ When you imagine ‘freedom’, what do you expect it to feel like? How does this imagined ideal differ from the quiet, ordinary freedom that actually appears during practice

- ★ What factors most hinder your sense of freedom, and what factors most reliably support it?

Journaling Prompts

- ★ **Glimpses of 'Freedom':** Describe in detail one specific moment (recent or past) where you experienced a sense of freedom from craving, compulsion, or intense suffering. What were the circumstances? What did it feel like physically and mentally?
- ★ **If-Then review:** Recall a recent 'If-Then plan', reflect on how it changed events, and what edit would make it even easier to use.
- ★ **Wave note :** Describe one urge wave you surfed – where it peaked, what you felt, and how it felt when it had passed.
- ★ **Valuing the subtle:** For the next day, intentionally look for small moments of ease, neutrality, or non-craving (for example, the quiet moment after a task, a moment of simple presence). Note these down and reflect on whether you usually overlook them.
- ★ **Edges of Freedom:** Recall a time when you sensed you were near freedom – not fully free, but loosening, softening, or seeing more clearly. What stopped you from relaxing fully into that space? Explore whether the obstacle was internal (beliefs, habits, fear of change) or external (stress, environment, people). What would a 'half-step of more freedom' have looked like in that moment?
- ★ **When Freedom surprises you:** Reflect on an unexpected moment of steadiness, patience, or non-reactivity – something you didn't plan for but noticed afterwards. What allowed this spontaneous freedom to appear? Was it prior practice, a change in conditions, a shift in attitude, or something else?
- ★ **Noticing the Everyday Sublime:** Today, notice or look closely at something utterly ordinary – a leaf, a cup, a patch of light, a breath of air – and pause long enough to let its quiet wonder reveal itself. Choose one moment where a simple detail felt unexpectedly vivid or beautiful, as if the world were shining through it. Describe exactly what you noticed. How did this shift the body (softening, opening, stilling)? How did the mind feel when awe arose without needing anything extraordinary to happen? Reflect on how turning toward these tiny, sublime details changes the sense of being alive in this moment.

Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of Freedom, the following overview highlights some key connections.

- ★ **Neuroscience:** A growing body of research confirms that freedom is not just a spiritual idea – it is embodied. The brain continually reshapes itself through experience (neuroplasticity), and practices that cultivate calm, non-reactivity, and steady attention literally reroute patterns of activation. When we pause, breathe, and soften, the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC) becomes more active. This area supports emotional regulation, impulse control, and the ability to choose rather than react. At the same time, the amygdala – often involved in fear and habit-driven reactivity – can gradually reduce its over-responsiveness.

Repeated contact with stillness also quiets the Default Mode Network (DMN), the network associated with rumination, self-referential thinking, worry, and mental time-travel. When the DMN settles, the mind becomes less entangled in ‘me and my story,’ and more able to rest in immediate experience. Over time, the nervous system learns that ease is safe. The stress-response circuitry (including the vagal network) begins to shift its baseline from hypervigilance toward rest-and-digest. Even the brain’s reward pathways can recalibrate: instead of seeking stimulation, relief, or intensity, they start to register the quieter rewards of calm, clarity, and non-compulsion. In this way, the possibility of ‘cessation’ becomes biologically realistic – the brain becomes less driven by craving because it has practised and become familiar with what freedom feels like.

- ★ **Psychology:** Contemporary psychology echoes this understanding and gives us language for it. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), for example, suggests that fighting discomfort usually amplifies it. When we stop struggling against difficult thoughts, emotions, or sensations, space opens around them. Freedom is not the disappearance of difficulty but the capacity to meet difficulty without being consumed by it. This mirrors Gotama’s third Realisation: suffering ends not by eliminating pain or conditioning, but by no longer clinging to or resisting what arises. In psychological terms, this is sometimes called ‘psychological flexibility’ – the ability to allow experience, choose values-led action, and stay present

even when the mind is churning. From this perspective, freedom is not an event at the end of the path. It is a moment-to-moment capacity that grows through practice: the ability to pause, soften, sense the whole of what is happening, and respond (or not) from a place that is not tight, frightened, or driven. Every small contact with ease strengthens this capacity. Freedom is cultivated not in grand breakthroughs but through hundreds of tiny choices to stay open rather than contract.

★ **Philosophy:** Stephen Batchelor reframes *nirodha* (cessation) not as a metaphysical annihilation but as ‘seeing the stopping of reactivity.’ He uses the image of a hinge: a door moves because the hinge does not. The hinge is the still point that makes freedom of movement possible.

In the same way, awareness becomes a steady axis upon which experience can turn. Sounds arrive, feelings swell, thoughts race, cravings surge – yet there is a stillness at the centre that does not move with them. Freedom is discovering and resting in that unmoving point.

This aligns with the Stoic ideal of *ataraxia* – freedom from disturbance, the calm that emerges when we stop adding commentary, resistance, or judgement to what is already here. Stoics taught not the elimination of emotion, but the cessation of unnecessary mental proliferation, the quiet that comes when we do not pour fuel on the fire. Seen through this lens, freedom is not a distant achievement. It is the simplest shift: the moment we stop compulsively grasping, pushing away, or spinning stories, the mind clears – like a pool settling after a stone has fallen through. This clarity is the practical, human heart of cessation.

Remember to remember

Gotama’s third realisation is the heartening assurance that the suffering amplified by our most destructive cravings, aversions and compulsions are not our final destiny. Cessation is possible; freedom is achievable. The third stage of the RAFT journey invites us to move beyond simply understanding this possibility and to actively familiarise ourselves with the direct experience of ‘Freedom’ – peace, ease, and non-compulsion.

Remember that freedom is not gained but revealed. It appears each time grasping relaxes and nothing rushes in to replace it. By turning our attention towards these glimpses of the safe shore, we validate our efforts and begin to embody the freedom we seek.

To maintain this freedom, we must now learn to spot the coming storms ('The Five Hazards') and catch the rising wind ('The Seven Supports'). And as we do, we discover the appropriate heart response to this newfound safety: Appreciative Joy. This joy is the 'rope' that binds our progress, ensuring that we not only find the safe shore but learn to delight in the journey towards it.

"When we let go of the struggle, what remains is the tenderness of life itself." ~ Jack Kornfield

"Freedom is not a destination; it's the capacity to meet each moment without contraction." ~ Tara Brach

Sutta References

★ Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) – Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion

- *Summary:* Defines the Third Noble Truth (*Dukkha Nirodha*) as the "remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it." It declares this truth is to be realised (*sacchikātabba*).

★ Samaññaphala Sutta (DN 2) – The Fruits of the Contemplative Life

- *Summary:* This sutta compares the state of mind when the Five Hindrances are abandoned to experiences of relief and freedom: like being free from debt, recovered from sickness, released from prison, freed from slavery, and arriving at a place of safety after a desert journey.

★ Ambalaṅṅhika Rāhulovāda Sutta (MN 61) – Advice to Rāhula

- *Summary:* The Buddha advises his son Rāhula to reflect carefully before acting, speaking, or even thinking: will this lead to harm or to benefit for myself and others? If harm is foreseen, he is encouraged to refrain; if harm is discovered afterwards, he is encouraged to confess and repair. This shows how the "pause" of non-reactivity naturally expresses itself as ethical responsiveness and repair in daily life.

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