

Through the practice of dispassion, we can loosen the knots that keep us earthbound and soar to new spiritual heights. **By Eknath Easwaran**

Untying Our Wings

The Way of Non-Attachment

TUMBLER PIGEONS HAVE BEEN POPULAR IN INDIA FOR CENTURIES. They get their name from their breathtaking way of dropping suddenly in free flight and doing somersaults as they fall, then spreading their wings and soaring back into the sky. And they have tremendous endurance.

They can fly without rest for 8 to 12 hours, and in India—especially in the south, where I grew up—the onset of the monsoon rains heralds marathon competitions to see whose pigeons can stay aloft the longest. It is easy to understand why raising these beautiful birds has been a sport for maharajas since Akbar the Great.

This is one passion that rajas have in common with children, and when I was a boy, a cousin and I decided to raise pet pigeons ourselves. Our ancestral home had wide courtyards and second-story tiled roofs, rather like a Spanish hacienda, and every morning these tumblers would come to sit on the red roof tiles and wait for rice or black gram to be spread on the courtyard to dry in the sun. It was not easy to make friends with the birds at first, but my cousin figured out a way that we could crawl up under the roof from the inside, slowly remove one or two tiles, and then stretch our hands out gently with a little black gram in our palms.

For days nothing happened. But after a while one pigeon decided that I was a friend and my hand was a hospitable hand, and he came over and tentatively pecked at my palm.

If you do not like pigeons, I admit, that pecking can hurt. And once they start pecking they pace around excitedly in circles and call “coo! coo!” to their fellows, so that quickly you have quite a number of them pecking at the grain in your palm. It took some patience to keep our hands still, but once they began to trust us, we could slowly get hold of the bird we liked and it wouldn’t even struggle.

We didn’t know anything about pigeons when we started keeping them as pets. But children have a lot of time for pigeons, and we took good care of them. We learned their favorite cereals and kept a fresh supply of them in half a dozen small pots. My cousin made little wooden homes which we upholstered with cotton from the fields. The result was so comfortable that one of my friends exclaimed, “Wouldn’t I like to be a pigeon and have a nice little home like that!”

Pigeons, of course, are used to flying freely. Until they became accustomed to living with human beings, we had to tie their wings. Some of the girls in my family were experts at this. They knew just how to hold the pigeon, spread its wings gently like a Japanese fan, and tie them loosely with a thread so that the bird

By relaxing our grasp on possessions, we begin to reclaim our freedom.





would not be able to fly away. For a few days the bird stayed in the courtyard while we made friends, pecking up the food we tossed out for it and going in and out of its little home. Then we would untie the wings and release the little creature into the air.

That was a thrilling moment. The pigeon would shoot straight up, and when

it reached 100 feet or so it would start doing somersaults while we children cheered and waved below, marveling at its speed and grace and the glint of the sun on its neck. After seeing the little fellow land-bound for so long, pattering around the courtyard as if it had never had wings at all, it was exhilarating to see it soar joyfully into the air.

Meant to Soar

Human beings are very much like these pigeons. All of us have wings, though we do not suspect it because they are so tightly tied. We are not meant to stay on the ground and peck at crumbs of personal pleasure and profit. We are meant to soar—to give our time and love freely to everyone around us. That is the essence of spiritual growth, and the whole purpose of meditation and other spiritual practices is to free our wings and allow us to fly high.

In India's mystical literature, the ties that keep us earthbound are called "knots that strangle the heart" because they constrict our capacity to love. There are millions of these ties, but perhaps the easiest to see are what I call personal attachments: possessions and activities we cling to that claim our time and attention at the expense of those around us.

Many of these attachments are material. Most of us have accumulated things that tie us down one way or another, often because we think they add to our status or prestige. Other attachments might be activities we enjoy that benefit no one, including ourselves. Whatever it is, we can't imagine doing without it. That is the hallmark of an attachment.

These ties might seem gossamer, but

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they add up. They can bind us so tightly that we can scarcely move beyond the limited circle of our personal likes and dislikes. Imagine if your favorite possessions were actually attached to you. How difficult it would be to drag them around even for a day! Yet the mental load we carry is no less burdensome. Shedding even a little of that load leaves us feeling as light and free as if we really did have wings.

We don't have to own many things to get attached to them. I have known students whose worldly goods fit into a dorm room, yet were fiercely attached to a pair of faded jeans with a story to tell. The issue is not how much we have but how tightly we hold on to it. While we are holding on to something for ourselves, we are not free to help others.

Attachments can come so easily! Over the years I have come regretfully to the conclusion that there is nothing on earth in which the human being cannot be caught. People can get tied to such a variety of knickknacks. If they go for a walk on the beach, they must pick up some little shell or stone and take it home. After a while these treasures accumulate into a collection that must be dusted, cared for, and preserved. Soon it is part of the household, to be passed down eventually to some puzzled offspring when we discover that we couldn't take it with us after all.

Or it might be hairpins—hairpins from around the world, hairpins down the ages. You become an authority, admirers ask you to give lectures and offer classes, and after a while you find it's not

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just your hair but your life that has become bound up with pins.

It's All in the Mind

Ironically, attachment can slowly strangle even our enjoyment of the things to which we are attached. They tend to grow on us, consuming more and more of our time and attention. After a while, as Henry David Thoreau says, we become not their owners but their servants.

One of my high school English teachers made this point in a way I have never forgotten. He had written a sentence on the board—"John owns a Ford car"—and asked us to rewrite it in the passive voice. Most of us got it right: "A Ford car is owned by John." But one of my cousins wrote instead, "A Ford car owns John." We started to laugh, but our teacher stopped us. "He may not know about the passive voice," he said sternly, "but he knows about life. And that is more important."

There is nothing wrong with possessions, even rather pointless ones. There is nothing wrong with hobbies and activities that are not at the expense of life. The problem is simply that when our time and attention get caught like this, that is time and attention we cannot give

to those around us. We bind up our own vitality this way, our capacity to live, to give, to love.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, which Mahatma Gandhi called his "spiritual reference book," throws light on what happens in such cases in the mind. "When you keep thinking about something," it points out—car, clothes, cats, computer—"attachment comes." It really is that simple. To get attached to something, nothing more is required than thinking about it over and over and over until that

becomes a habit. Then our thinking gets caught, and the more it is caught, the less awareness we have for anything else.

In my village school, we children used the English word "love" rather casually, making statements like "I love this book!" Our teacher, who was particular about grammar and usage, would always correct us: "People are to be loved. Things are to be used." Tragically, we have got it backwards today.

How to Untie a Knot

Here the Buddha offers a wonderfully practical strategy. Just as a knot can be untied by reversing the steps required to tie it, he says, attachments can be loosened by doing the opposite of what created them. Whenever you find yourself spending time and energy on something you are attached to that doesn't benefit anybody—tinkering with your Honda, cataloging your music, exploring malls or catalogs to find more things to buy—put your attention somewhere else instead. Again, it's that simple.

Of course, simple doesn't mean easy. But understanding brings motivation. Once you see what your mind is doing to you with these little habits and decide you prefer the freedom of making choices yourself instead, you will discover a

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The Art of Letting Go

By Anna Dubrovsky

ON AUGUST 29, 2005, three pine trees crashed into the roof of the Yoga School in Covington, Louisiana, about 40 miles north of New Orleans. Owner Becky Gelatt considered herself lucky; Hurricane Katrina did far worse that day. In its aftermath, Gelatt had a lot of work on her hands: dealing with the roof, of course, but also with the profound grief that washed over her close-knit yoga community. Katrina was a brutal reminder that nothing is permanent—that everything material can be taken from us at any moment. And it brought up a question: How do we prepare for loss?

For starters, we can apply the concept of self-discipline, or *tapas*, to our daily lives. Giving up coffee or cashews or anything else to which we're compulsively attached is a form of *tapas*. The shedding of attachments gives us a fuller appreciation of our inner strength, culminating in a sense of freedom. And it steels us for the inevitable. Choosing to let go of attachments trains us to loosen our grip when we have no choice. Hurricanes happen. Recessions happen. "The whole process of aging is a process of giving up—as profound a loss as having a house swept off the ground," says Gelatt, 70. "Yoga teaches us to let go with grace."

Whether we choose to give up something, or something is taken from us, a period of grief ensues, Gelatt has found. After Katrina, she helped many students cope with grief and fear by teaching restorative poses such as child's pose with a bolster beneath the torso and a blanket draped over the body. (See page 61 for more restorative poses). "When people feel comfortable in a pose, they feel safe," Gelatt says. "In feeling safe, they can relax a little more." She recommends long exhalations, which have a calming effect, along with a mental recitation such as "As I let go of the breath, I let go to all."

As the eye of the hurricane swept through Louisiana, Gelatt chanted a traditional Sanskrit verse. Drawn from the Upanishads, it reminds us that letting go is also a process of letting in.

<i>Asato ma sad gamaya</i>	Lead me from the unreal to the real.
<i>Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya</i>	Lead me from darkness to light.
<i>Mrityor ma amritam gamaya</i>	Lead me from death to immortality.

When we give up attachments to things that are impermanent—unreal—we become attuned to that which is unchanging and real. We move from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge. "I could hear trees creaking and cracking and falling, see parts of roofs flying by," Gelatt recalls. "I never stopped chanting." It took several weeks for electricity to be restored to the Yoga School, but when the lights came on, Gelatt saw a new direction. She shifted her focus from general classes to teacher training so that more yoga teachers could serve the community. "That was a realization born of the storm—how many more qualified teachers we need," she says. "We don't know why these losses occur. But they could be a preparation for something better, something higher, something mysterious."

🔊 Hear the above Sanskrit verse at yogaplus.org/asatoma.

thousand and one little ways to practice untying these knots every day.

Whenever you find yourself spending time in a way that seems out of proportion, for example, or indulging in some activity that you secretly admit to be a waste of time, disengage yourself and put your time somewhere more constructive instead. Pay more attention to your family; do something necessary that you've been putting off. When you can do this, you are withdrawing love from that thing or activity so that you can direct it freely.

I can give one small example of this at my own expense. South India is full of cashew trees, and when I was a boy, the path to school led through a cashew nut orchard. Everyone likes cashew nuts, and the tree in fruit is an artist's delight—beautiful colors made to captivate the eye. So a cashew orchard is a double temptation, and we boys, transparently honest on other occasions, regularly stopped to rob those particular trees on our way to school.

I must have done this throughout my career in high school. Then, after India's independence, all our cashews began to be exported to the United States of America—a matter of foreign exchange—and those delicious nuts disappeared from my life. For the rest of my time in India, I got no nearer to a cashew than the factories where they were processed.

I thought I had forgotten this childhood passion until many years later, in the U.S., when a hospitable friend with whom I was staying discovered this skeleton in my cupboard. She brought a big tin of cashew nuts and left it on my table as a surprise.



That evening I was reading the *Gita* with deep concentration when I suddenly discovered that my right hand was missing. I set the book aside and looked for it. It was hidden in the cashew tin!

I was utterly astonished. My mind and I are on fairly good terms, so I said sternly, “You can’t be doing what I think you are doing! Nibbling without my approval?” My mind looked sheepish. “Boss, you don’t think I would do that, do you? I was only trying to find out what was in the tin.”

Clearly, this was time to nip a compulsive attachment in the bud before it got out of hand.

I did not eat a single cashew that day, though my mind was craving for them. All those old, fierce memories were aroused, but every time they clamored for cashews, I went for a fast walk repeating my mantram or gave my mind something spiritual to read instead.

The next day was the same, and the next. For a few days, I read with my book supported by both hands.

Finally the craving went away. I forgot about cashew nuts completely. That day I told my mind, “Now you can take a handful and enjoy.”

This is freedom. And, let me tell you, cashew nuts eaten in freedom taste a hundred times better than nuts eaten under the tyranny of a craving.

I would be the first to confess that this isn’t easy. Not only that, it can be unpleasant. After all, attachments are things we say we love. But that is the problem: love is caught in them. When you want to love more, to expand your love beyond its present circle, to untie the knots that are strangling your heart, you get the overriding motivation to go against these conditioned habits. Then you get an exhilarating taste of what freedom means.

The marvel of this is that when we free our attention anywhere, even a



Find ease in the world: the less you hold the more you can love.

little, it is freer everywhere. When we go through the day catering to our own private preoccupations and prepossessions, we are tying our wings till they become bound so tight that we don’t even believe they are there. But each knot untied means a little more freedom—a little more freedom to love.

When you want nothing for yourself alone, the whole world is yours to enjoy. “To arrive at having everything,” John of the Cross says, “desire to have nothing.” This is real joy, which no one has described more ecstatically than the English poet and mystic Thomas Traherne:

You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world.

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We do not have to grow wings to soar to these heights; we are born with them. Nobody has bound them but ourselves, and nobody but ourselves can set them free. This is a challenge for a lifetime, but as we learn to do this, we come to feel more and more tenderness and concern for everybody.

Finally, when all the ties that bind our wings are undone, the love released is boundless. You can give an infinite amount of it to your partner, children, parents, and in-laws and still have a limitless reserve for everyone else. This increases the joy of living a million times. If loving your close ones can bring such joy, the mystics say, how much more joy must come with loving all? ■

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