

The Mystical Experience of Loss of Freedom

by A Political Prisoner

This article was originally passed on by member Ann Wetherall, who is researching into mystical experience in prisons. It was first published in the Network Newsletter No 33 thirty years ago and proved so popular that we reprinted it as a booklet. I am reprinting it here again as its message is profound and timeless.

In recent years a number of books have appeared, in which the authors have described their experiences in Soviet prisons and punishment camps. Some of these eyewitness accounts are of particular interest because they deal not only with the outward effects of loss of freedom, but also with the deep processes of change which take place in the inner man in that fearful world of Soviet prison life. These descriptions of what happens in the hearts of people in prison contradict in many ways our thinking hitherto on the subject.

Let me say at the start that the phenomena here analysed are of revolutionary importance not only for psychologists and psychoanalysts in the Twentieth Century, for Marxists and for sociologists of the West, but for modern science in general, including philosophy. It must be emphasised that we are dealing with empirical phenomena, which were recorded by men who normally had nothing in common. That is what makes the unanimity of their experiences and testimonies so valuable and significant.

The most fruitful works to study are the first and second volumes of Solzhenitsyn's 'Gulag Archipelago', Schifrin's 'Fourth Dimension', Panine's 'Experiences in Solgdin' and Siniovski's 'A voice from the Chorus'.



The most significant paradoxes

Reading these works carefully, again and again we come across statements that seem paradoxical. For instance, all the writers agree that arrest, imprisonment, the camps, in short the loss of freedom are the most important experiences of their lives. Moreover, they assure us that, although under these conditions they had to endure the worst forms of psychic and physical suffering, they experienced at the same time moments of utter happiness, such as those outside the camp walls could never imagine. Never before had they felt love, hate and despair so strongly, never lived through such interesting days and nights filled with the basic questions of human existence, never felt so at one with the universe, as during their time in prison.

On this basis, loss of freedom could be defined as particularly concentrated and intensive living, and it is a fact that in prison, in spite of all the suffering – and not only according to the statements of the writers we are studying – there is hardly ever suicide.

Another paradox confirmed by the writers is that only those can preserve their bodies and physical existence, who preserve their souls i.e. those who, obeying an inner urge, are prepared to lose their physical existence. Generally, one assumes the opposite – that in a difficult situation a man has to choose to save either body or soul. Yet these writers, who have lived through situations where both body and souls were threatened, affirm unanimously that those who try to preserve their physical existence at the expense of their souls, lost both, while those who were prepared to sacrifice their bodies for the sake of their souls, by some mysterious law, and contrary to what they expected, had their bodies, i.e. their physical existence, preserved.

This means that it is now an incontestable experience of life that in the depths of the human soul there swells an unexplained force which is stronger – and not only symbolically, but empirically stronger – than all outward forces of oppression and destruction, however invincible they may seem. Those who describe these happenings which have been repeated and confirmed hundreds of times under the most frightful conditions of imprisonment – have come to the conclusion that powerful forms of psychic energy are dormant in every human soul, that the psychic world cannot be separated from the physical, and that the thoughts and wishes of a person achieve far more in the outer, physical world than do his hands.

At the same time, the writers assure us that nothing in their lives happened by chance and that, contrary to all their efforts and plans to decide their own fate, everything ran along pre-arranged lines. This seems contradictory: on the other hand, mysterious powers are supposed to be given to a person, which in some inexplicable way affect the outer world, and on the other hand there is some kind of Predestination before which the person is powerless.

But the contradiction is only a seeming one. If a man, against all outward circumstances, against his own wishes and plans, in spite of the threat of physical destruction and against all the dictates of reason – let alone public opinion – if he obeys that voice which, deep in his soul, is subject to no rational control, then roads open up to him of their own accord which lead not only to the preserving of what he thought he had given up by obeying this mysterious inner compass, but also to the fulfilment of his most secret wishes.

If, on the other hand, a man seeks to realise his own plans and desires, to save his life and escape physical destruction by actions in the visible world that are contrary to the commands of his inner voice – some call this voice the instinct for freedom – then fate, *das Fatum*, takes its course and sooner or later brings to nothing what was to be achieved against the inner voice.

But man has the freedom to decide whether or not to follow the inexplicable yet so real inner voice. To put it more clearly, the terrible experience of suffering in prison makes him free. On that basis there is no contradiction. Unalterable destiny and the highest form of freedom exist side by side. It depends on the person himself whether he submits to fate or chooses freedom.

If this is so – and the experiences described here confirm it – then the conclusions to be drawn from it must shake the whole edifice of science, not only on man and his psyche, but also on visible and invisible reality. If there are two worlds, which are not merged together, yet cannot be separated from each other i.e. the world of fate and the world of freedom; if a person lives in the one world or the other, according to whether he obeys or disobeys that mysterious and sometimes unclear inner voice, which neither reason nor science can explain, yet is separate and personal to every human being – then any science is senseless which starts from the assumption that there is only one world, with one and the same laws valid for everybody, a world which can be mastered by an understanding of such laws that are independent of man.

The experience of those who have known this (prison) life as the greatest freedom, teaches the opposite: neither the knowledge of the laws with which present-day science is concerned, nor the knowledge of these mysterious and so far unexplained laws which, contrary to every expectation and probability, save those who follow the dictates of their inner voice – neither of these gives a man power. Moreover, to be saved, a person needs not power but freedom. And we find freedom not by knowledge but by faith.

Faith alone makes it possible to obey that inner voice, of which there is no 'objective' proof. In other words, to obey the inner voice, that is faith. Panine writes: 'Here in this concentrated life every teaching is tested under the harshest conditions.' Siniovski adds: 'Here there is more intensive thinking than in science' and, speaking from personal experience he says categorically: 'Science is getting away from Truth'.

These men, completely cut off from the outside world, study the Bible, which they carry around in handwritten extracts on scraps of paper. They discover the forgotten basic truths of the Eastern Yoga teaching: they turn to Theosophy; in brief, they try by every means to master their personal experiences, which they cannot doubt even if they run contrary to any number of teachings, ideologies, doctrines and scientific theories.

Perhaps the most paradoxical and most optimistic conviction of these men, who have experienced the concentrated force of evil in their own bodies, is that the power of good is stronger than anything else. Panine writes that the world resembles a white tablecloth with black spots rather than a black tablecloth with white spots.

Not political

From what we have said so far it is clear that the battle between the individual and the powers of evil and destruction is not at all a political one. The battle being fought in the totalitarian states today is in reality not political but religious, even if this is not always clear to those taking part. Solzhenitsyn is right when he says that it is precisely the Christians who represent a truly political force in the USSR, because they rob the totalitarian system of its basis, namely the belief in the priority of the visible world and the dependence of man's inner world on the outer.

If the outer world is stronger than the inner, then the oppression of man cannot be removed by political reforms. If, however, the outer world obeys the inner forces of the human soul, then man's fate depends on himself. Then there are no innocent sufferers. Then all trials and sufferings are deserved and just. But equally the way is open to a life of freedom in which a humane political system is but the outcome of the inner freeing of the soul.

While the question, whether man obeys the outer world or vice versa, is of purely theoretical interest for most people, for those whose experiences we are studying here, and for millions of others in the same position, it has very practical significance. Whoever follows his inner voice and saves his soul, learns empirically that, so long as the soul is not lost, the most important is not lost. From this knowledge comes belief in the immortality of the soul: to obey the inner voice means nothing less than to define actions in time in terms of eternity.

Such an experience is, however, not only for those living under extreme conditions of loss of freedom, but for all who have lived and will live on this Earth. It is extremely important to realise that prison and punishment camp, i.e. the uncontrollable caprice of the powers of the visible world, sooner or later await everyone, and that we cannot escape the decision whether we will submit to death and to total physical and psychic destruction or whether, contrary to all 'realism', objectivity and common sense, we will courageously follow our inner voice. Illness, catastrophes, accidents and death are only another form of arrest, trial, prison and punishment camp. Nobody can escape them.

The first and most important factor

What happens to a person who is suddenly torn away from his normal life and falls into the hands of merciless forces who only want one thing, to destroy him? Can he defend himself? Everything that has so far made up that person's life, everything he possessed – freedom, friends, work he enjoyed, property, body, life itself. All this he cannot protect; it is now in the power of Evil. And if he tries to defend himself by means which belong to the world in which he has lived hitherto, he is doomed to failure from the start. Whatever these outward forces take away from him, he cannot protect in his own strength.

It is at this decisive point, immediately before his complete destruction, that the person begins to realise that there is something which is beyond the reach of the outward, seemingly invincible forces and that, even if nothing else can be saved, there is one respect in which resistance, fight and victory are possible, namely, when it is a question of preserving his soul. Whoever trusts and obeys the inner voice of freedom has a chance of emerging victorious from the battle against evil and oppression. But first he must renounce everything which the forces of the visible world can take from him.

'Above all, don't cling to life', writes Solzhenitsyn, and again, 'Possess nothing, free yourself from everything, even those nearest to you, because they too are your enemies.' Panine confirms that the struggle demands separation from everything – except the soul. Only he who renounces everything becomes completely free – i.e. freedom begins where there is nothing more to lose.

When a man has got rid of all that ties him, a mysterious thing happens to this outwardly unfree, but inwardly at last utterly free person. In the depths of his soul there rises up a mighty force, which not only endows his totally exhausted body with incredible powers of resistance, but, in strange ways which we do not yet fully understand, also begins to affect the visible world. i.e. to determine events over which, I repeat once more, he can, as far as we know today, have no influence, but which becomes his salvation.

That is why Panine writes: 'Who saves his soul, saves his body too.' That is why Solzhenitsyn says repeatedly that only the spirit can save, only the spirit can preserve the body, and all four writers confirm that the body, as they have seen again and again in themselves and others, responds with incredible toughness to strong spiritual concentration, while the loss of the spiritual leads to physical disintegration.

The relationship to the inner force

'There is a tremendous force living within us,' Panine asserts, and goes on to say that the whole universe is in some mysterious way linked to the depth of our soul. 'Each of us is the centre of the universe', writes Solzhenitsyn. They did not come to this conclusion by abstract thought, but have again and again experienced the effect of this unknown force in their own bodies.

Solzhenitsyn writes of a strange inner warmth that seems to come from another world and saves a person from freezing in a glacier ice. Panine tells of a mysterious, unknown force which brought him back to life after forty days.

He who lets go of all outward trappings and decides from then on to obey his inner voice – which is only another name for faith – and then discovers to his amazement this mysterious yet real force at work not only inside himself but in the outer world, realises at the same time that he is not master of this force and cannot use it as he wishes. On the contrary, he begins to understand that everything in his life, indeed life itself, is entirely dependent on the mysterious inner power, which, in the language of religion, is called God.

In their attempts to discover more about this mighty, mystical power and its relationship to man, prisoners have tried out various methods of developing their inner life. Not from abstract or theoretical considerations nor as scientific experiments, but simply and solely in order to be able to meet the frightening and unavoidable danger of death, they have tested the effects of prayer, of meditation, of yoga and even exorcism. Alongside the Old and New Testament – in so far as these were available in the form of single texts committed to memory – everything connected with the teaching of Yoga, parapsychology and theosophy became for them a highly important and very necessary practical help in their attempt to preserve body and soul while they tried to influence directly their outward circumstances by their spiritual efforts.

Panine confirms the real effect of prayer. Solzhenitsyn speaks of an inner 'relay system', which advises him unerringly on the qualities of each person he meets. Others testify to the complete reliability of what is commonly called 'instinct'. A person's character is, however, also reflected in his eyes. What the eyes say 'is better than a passport' in the view of Schifrin, Panine and Solzhenitsyn.

The most important mystical law

If it is true that a mere thought can bring about certain results, then it is not to be wondered at that in totalitarian systems 'thinking differently' as Schifrin calls it, is regarded as the worst kind of crime. Or that Solzhenitsyn writes: 'A mere thought was punishable!'

A story told by Solzhenitsyn in the first volume of *Gulag Archipelago* is the best illustration of the mystical law of which we have been speaking. An astrophysicist in solitary confinement tried to avoid going mad by thinking out specific astrophysical laws and problems. At one point he could go no further because he did not know by heart some of the dates and figures he needed. The mental exercise which enabled him to keep sane, came to a full stop. In his despair he began to pray. He did not know as yet to whom, whether to God or an unknown power.

A miracle happened. By mistake a text book on astrophysics, which he could never have dreamt would be available in such a place, was brought to his cell from the prison library. When two days later the mistake was discovered and the book taken away again, the astrophysicist had already looked up and learned by heart all the dates he needed. His mental work could go on, and not only saved him but also helped him to discover a new theory.

Schiffrin also mentions cases of strange interventions in events which were threatening his inner convictions. Thus, during a camp search several improbable 'chance happenings' saved the only copy of the Bible and a handwritten text of the book of Exodus, in whose translation and dissemination Schiffrin saw his life work. Here too, it was not the thought which had the effect. It was rather the mystical law, responding to a person's strong, inner concentration on a particular goal and bringing about the effect in an outside world seemingly beyond the person's influence. Neither the thought, nor the magical power of thought in the outer world, produced the desired result, but as Solzhenitsyn assumes in the second volume of Gulag Archipelago 'Heaven heard the prayers and intervened'.

It can therefore be said that any deviation from the prescribed way of thinking – a punishable offence under totalitarianism – is not the cause but the result of an inner philosophy of life, a philosophy which is dangerous to the ruling powers because it is 'inside' and hence uncontrollable. It is not so much the thoughts that are punishable, as the inner set of values. The strong inner concentration on a particular goal sets off events in the outer world, which set the stage for the realisation of the inner goal. This is the mystical basic law which changes the whole of human thinking and dynamites the ideas forming the foundation of science.

At the same time, this inner striving is not voluntary. It is not dependent on the desire or will of the person concerned. All that depends on the person is whether he wishes to follow the inner impulse or not. Yet as far as the outer world is concerned the decision to follow in future the call of the inner voice is an act of complete freedom, and we are reminded of Berdyaev's words that it is not man but God who desires the freedom of man.

Solzhenitsyn stresses again and again that it was only the weak who fell into the hands of the NKVD, out of fear. And here we have an interesting discovery of Grossman's. He found that those prisoners who opposed the totalitarian system and fought against it until their arrest, i.e. those who obeyed their inner voice, believed in the innocence of all the prisoners, while those who had been careful to avoid incurring any guilt towards the rulers and yet landed up in prison camp, believed that only in their case a mistake had been made, and that all the other prisoners were in fact guilty. Only suffering brought them to the realisation that very few bore any guilt towards the rulers, but that they themselves were guilty before their own souls, which demands they had neglected in order to serve their earthly lives.

This shows that we can never, even temporarily, in order to deceive the evil powers and save our own lives, deny our inner voice without paying a price, or as Solzhenitsyn says, we cannot 'in order to live, not live'.

A final word

'How can we free him, who is unfree in his soul?' asks the author of the Gulag Archipelago', and Schiffrin replies: 'He alone is free, who frees himself from the wretchedness of inner slavery'.

The experience of loss of freedom has proved that every human being is in a position to create for himself a stage of complete freedom, and that it is within his power to change the world on the basis of the mystical law. Experience has further shown that the fate of men is not decided by earthly powers, by outward, physical forces, but only by the mystical power which from time immemorial has been called 'God', and whose relationship to man seems to depend on man's relationship to his inner voice. This is nothing less than the glorious confirmation of the ontological and empirical freedom of every human being. Man can hardly experience any greater happiness than the knowledge that he can influence events in the world, against and in spite of the mighty influence of Evil. This freedom, born of obedience to the inner voice, the soul, cannot be taken away from man by any outside force. He can only betray it himself.

The recognition that the invisible world is a reality must change the whole human thinking and learning of our age. However, there is no guarantee that man will draw the right conclusions from these experiences. The authors of the remarkable books we have quoted seem by no means certain when it comes to generalising and making available for others their prison experience of freedom following obedience to the inner voice, that what saved them must also save others.

In their view it is not from within, as their experience teaches, but from without that the freedom of the individual and of mankind will come. Solzhenitsyn thinks in terms of a human form of authoritarian society, whose ideological basis will be the Orthodox faith. Panine places his hope Church and the classical church organisation. Schiffrin in esoteric teachings.

Yet they are precisely the men who ought to know that the salvation and liberation of man cannot be guaranteed by any form of organised society, by any church or ideology, by any esoteric or exoteric teachings, but only by the mighty power which guides both the inner and the outer world of man. Only when man obeys the voice of that power will he be free, even in the face of death, like Daniel in the lion's den. As far as the inner voice is concerned, it is different for every single person, and there are no outward securities to guarantee it, such as reason, science, the Church or any teaching. But anyone whose eyes have been opened has no more need of these securities than a man with a compass need laboriously to figure out where North or South will be from any future position.

'He alone enters the Promised Land, who does not know where he is going,' says Lew Schestow – and I believe that too.



“You only have power over people so long as you don't take everything away from them. But when you've robbed a man of everything, he's no longer in your power - he's free again.”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn