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Also by Jeff Foster:  
Beyond Awakening

# LIFE WITHOUT A CENTRE



Awakening from  
the Dream of Separation

**JEFF FOSTER**

*2nd edition revised*

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*“Having a centre is the very essence of sorrow.  
The centre creates the tomorrow.”*

J. Krishnamurti

*“Not knowing how near the truth is,  
We seek it far away, what a pity!  
We are like one who, in the midst of water,  
Cries out desperately in thirst.”*

Hakuin

## Contents

*Preface to the Revised Edition* ♣ ix

*Introduction* ♣ 1

About This Book 5

PART ONE – Liberation: Here and Now 9

Dialogues I 43

PART TWO – Realising There's Nobody Home 65

Dialogues II 87

PART THREE – Life Without a Centre 107

## Preface to the Revised Edition

“There is no language of the holy.  
The sacred lies in the ordinary.”

*Deng Ming-Dao*

This is no ordinary book on spirituality. Its message is gentle yet revolutionary, simple yet radical, challenging yet compassionate. Its aim is to reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary, to uncover the spiritual in the material, to point to the freedom and enlightenment that lie in wait, always, right the midst of life, a life which is finally seen to have no solid, suffering, separate person at its centre. This book will challenge your notions of spirituality. It will question the idea that there is, in fact, anything in the world separate from anything else, that there is somehow a “me” separate from “you”, that the world of spiritual enlightenment is not already here, that the Kingdom of Heaven lies beyond, that Oneness is somewhere out there.

And so this book is really about the end of the spiritual search: the end of seeking, the end of striving, the end of suffering, the end of the idea that you are a little person in a big world, somehow separate from the Whole. And, as we shall see, when the mind’s endless search for something more falls away, there can be a gentle explosion into something far more powerful, far more joyful, and far simpler than anything we were promised by the teachings of the world.

We've all experienced it: the falling away of everything. It can happen anywhere, at any time: perhaps during a walk through a park, or upon seeing the face of a newborn baby, or whilst embracing a loved one. All past and future fall away, all ideas of a future attainment, a future happiness, a future "something" simply dissolve into an open space which embraces everything. And in that falling away, there is a simple joy, a freedom without a name, an absence which is really a perfect presence. In that space which opens up, past and future, and you and your entire life story, and indeed the world in its entirety are nothing more than wonderful memories.

It is the falling away of the self, the little "you" at the centre of your life, and it feels like freedom. A freedom right in the midst of life, a freedom at the heart of suffering. And this freedom is so simple, so obvious, so present, that the mind could only ever ignore it. To the mind, these moments of freedom are without value. To you, they are everything.

And of course, this is where words may begin to seem very paradoxical and confusing. But don't worry: the message of *Life Without A Centre* is not contained in the words at all. It's hinted at in the words, to be sure, but the real heart of this message pulsates in the energy behind the words, in a resonance that becomes so utterly obvious when the endless seeking of the mind collapses. It is not a communication from "me" to "you", from a separate person to a separate person, but a sharing from Spirit to Spirit, from Openness to Openness, from Clarity to Clarity.



This is a journey into your own absence. And to the seeking mind, a book about absence has no value. You see, the mind always wants something *more* – some new content, some new idea or belief system, something to chew on. It hunts around the world, feeding itself, making itself fatter. And whether it's a search for happiness, or permanent pleasure, or eternal peace, or spiritual enlightenment, it's still a search, and a search always implies that something has been lost, that something here is not quite right. No wonder we are always left feeling unsatisfied, discontented, incomplete.

This book will not exacerbate the problem and give food to an already bloated ego. Like a Zen koan, it will not add any content, provide any new concepts or beliefs with which the ego can bolster itself, make itself stronger. And this refusal to provide *something for me to do* can be very frustrating for a mind seeking something to chew on. But in that frustration, a new possibility may shine through. And it's a possibility that has nothing to do with any sort of future attainment. It's the possibility that you are.



Since the initial publication of this book over a year ago, I have received many emails and phone calls from readers all over the world. Whilst the reaction has been overwhelmingly positive, occasionally there has been annoyance, frustration, and even anger.

The main argument that I hear is that this book makes it all seem too simple. That I'm a teacher without a teaching. That I'm advocating "doing nothing". That I'm claiming

that this moment is perfect, the world is perfect, everything is perfect and we should all just relax, put our feet up and crack open a beer. That wars and genocides and global warming don't really matter because it's all an illusion of mind. And I would answer: *look again*.

Another argument is that I'm too young, that I haven't experienced enough of life, that yes, I've had some sort of spiritual experience but it's all gone to my head. And I would only say this: *look again*.

Another argument: that I'm claiming that all spiritual practices and methods are a waste of time. *My goodness, no*. They are all wonderful, all utterly appropriate. But perhaps there will come a time when all practices, all rituals, all methods directed towards a future goal no longer satisfy. Perhaps all of our "doing" only ever leads to more "doing". And perhaps there is something beyond all "doing", something – and it's not really a "thing" – that is more wonderful than any "doing" could ever be. Perhaps. And this book is about nothing less than that possibility, the Possibility of all possibilities.

You think this book is about just giving up your spiritual practices? Well, *look again...*

When there is a readiness to hear this message, there is a readiness to hear this message, and nobody can tell you when that will happen. But there is a perfect unfolding to all of this, and everything happens exactly when it needs to, and I don't ever expect anyone to be ready before they are ready. And if they are never ready, then wonderful, that's exactly what's supposed to happen too. Everything exists

in perfect harmony with everything else, and that includes the whole spiritual search, the endless seeking of the mind, and perhaps, finally, the falling away of that seeking, and an effortless resting with what is. You can't taste an orange until you taste an orange. You can't eat a meal by studying the menu. *Life Without A Centre* is not about intellectual understanding, but a resonance that hits you when it hits you. And when it hits you, there is no longer a "you" to be hit. Not the "you" of the mind, anyway...



This book was originally published in a very raw form. It had been compiled from writings made in the years following what some might call "spiritual awakening". Since then, the way in which this message expresses itself has evolved (an evolution which later gave rise to another book, "Beyond Awakening: The End of the Spiritual Search"). However, this first book gives a fascinating glimpse into the experience and expression of those early, dramatic days. It is a record of how the clarity began to seep into my world. Back then, it was all so new and exciting, and the expression in *Life Without A Centre* reflects that early sense of explosive energy, barely containable joy and shimmering aliveness.

These days, the drama of it all has died down, but it still goes on: gently, sweetly, lovingly, innocently, always there in the background, whispering so very softly that *everything is okay, everything is always okay*. And what a perfect play it has all been, and still is: the seeking, the suffering, the drama of it all, and the falling away, the collapse into presence, into the clarity that reveals itself in and as the utterly ordinary things of life. And none of this has anything to

do with a Jeff Foster. Oh yes, that's the grand cosmic joke here: *it's nothing to do with me*. And everything to do with, well, everything. This is about Life expressing itself, not the experiences or beliefs of an individual called Jeff Foster.

In this revised edition of the book, the text has been tidied up and changes have been made to improve the clarity of the writing. But remember, when all is said and done, it's not about the words, however clear they are or are not. The words are just pointers to something which can never really be spoken of. The real message is in the energy, the resonance, the aliveness in which the words arise. And that's not something that the intellect could ever grasp. Nor does it ever need to.

This is a book about the innocence that you really are, beyond all the seeking and suffering of the mind, beyond your life story, beyond time and space itself. It points to your true nature.

Jeff Foster  
*Brighton, UK*  
*February 2008*

## Introduction

*T*his is all there is, although in a thousand different ways we spend our lives searching for something more.

And what is *this*?

Present sights, present sounds, present smells, present thoughts. Present memories of the past, present ideas of what the future may hold. Present desire for a permanent end to problems, for permanent pleasure, for permanent happiness. Present ideas of myself, my achievements and failures, my difficult life and all its problems. Present breathing, present beating of the heart, present gas bills piled up on the kitchen table, present *miaowing* of the cat, present screaming of children out in the street, present pain in the chest, present longing for *something more than this*, present feeling of frustration at *just not getting it*, present desire to be free from it all, forever.

Watch a child at play. For them, it seems, this life is a great game, a giant playground where everything fascinates, and there seems to be little desire to escape from life and all its problems, to move into some higher or more spiritual dimension. As adults, however, we seem to spend a lot of time trying to escape from the play of life and all the suffering that being a person-in-the-world inevitably entails. Drink, drugs, sex, money and meditation are common means of escape.

And, of course, there is much traditional and contemporary spirituality which is more than happy to cater to the same desire. However, in catering to this desire, the idea that there is, in fact, an individual who could escape from suffering in the first place, or indeed do anything at all, is inevitably reinforced.

In this book, the possibility is suggested that there is only ever the present appearance of life, with no individual at its core who could ever escape even if they wanted to. Indeed, the individual is merely another appearance in the play, not something that needs to be accepted or rejected, transcended or denied, but something that simply appears, along with all the other sights, sounds, smells, thoughts and feelings.

This message is so simple, so obvious. The individual (the seeker, the sufferer, the candlestick maker) simply *appears* as another part of the play of life. And with it may arise the desire to escape from life, but that too is merely another appearance, another part of the narrative.

And all of this is absolutely fine. None of it needs to be accepted or rejected, transcended or denied. Suffering is fine, seeking some sort of spiritual enlightenment or liberation is fine, precisely because there is nobody there in the first place. "A person at the centre of it all" is just another appearance, another belief, another part of the story.

But don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying that we should get rid of our beliefs. Beliefs are fine, and the need for the destruction or transcendence of beliefs would just be another belief anyway. And so, this book will not offer

the individual – that is, you – any new beliefs, nor will it attempt to destroy any present ones. *Nothing* ever needs to be denied or rejected for liberation to be, because in this moment, as life plays out, there is always *already* liberation, and anything we do to achieve liberation is simply misguided, but nonetheless perfectly acceptable.

Already nobody is running this show, already nobody is suffering and already nobody longs to be free. There is simply the present appearance of it all. Simply *this*, and nothing more. It's so simple, so obvious.

*The heart beats, and you are not doing it.*

*Breathing happens, and you are not doing it.*

*Sounds in the room happen, and you are not doing them.*

*Pain arises, and you are not causing it. Joy happens, and you have no choice. The sun rises and sets, flowers grow and wither and die, seasons change in the blink of an eye, and you are not in charge of this dream world. The play of opposites plays itself out, and there is an undetectable Silence that continuously embraces it all, allowing everything to arise exactly as it is.*

And the entire world arises in this open space, in this vastness which is utterly free from separateness and solidity, but which embraces separateness and solidity like a mother embraces a newborn baby.

The secret is there in your heartbeat, in your breathing, in the sights and sounds and smells manifesting themselves

exactly where you are, right now.

*The secret is here. Do you see?*



And not even the recognition or intellectual understanding of any of the above is necessary for liberation, as so often we are told by the spiritual teachers. None of these words need to be understood. There is nothing to “get”, nothing to transcend, nothing to be achieved. Lack of understanding, lack of “getting it”, lack of achievement: these are yet more present appearances in the play of life, no worse nor better than their opposites. And all opposites unravel in *this*.

Beyond belief or lack of it, beyond anything that words could ever state, beyond all beyonds, there is always this, now and forever.

## About This Book

This book was written over a two year period, as the desperate search for an escape from life began to be seen through. The seeing-through was sometimes dramatic, sometimes subtle, and always hard to talk about without sounding like a complete self-contradiction.

Here are some points to bear in mind as you read.

- In this book, no methods are laid out, no *Path to Self Realisation* is set forth. There is no *Seven Step Plan to Happiness*, no *Twenty Days To A More Enlightened You*. If things were that easy, wouldn't the mind have ended its search by now?
- There is no logical progression in this book. Nothing follows on from anything else, and the text is riddled with paradoxes and contradictions. And this can be very frustrating for a mind hooked on logic, rationality and intellectual understanding. But as I will point out over and over again, this message is not to be understood on an intellectual level. The writing consistently points back to the simplest but most profound truth: *This is all there is*. This constant reminding of the utterly obvious will not be of any help to you, the individual, but as the message begins to permeate (for want of a better word) and as the apparent existence of the separate individual is seen through, an ease and an equanimity may be revealed. And this ease and equanimity, well, it's your natural state.

- This book will not help you, *if* you are looking to be helped. But perhaps, in spite of this book, there will be a seeing through of the need to be helped. Perhaps there will be a seeing through of the search for spiritual enlightenment, the search for Nirvana, the search for peace, the search for liberation and awakening. Or perhaps there won't be any seeing through of the search, and that is fine too. Everything that happens is absolutely appropriate, because in the final analysis, you are not in control of any of it. But more of that later.

- Read this book slowly. Its words are meditations, not ideas for you to chew on intellectually. Let the words penetrate, percolate, permeate. Take your time. Enjoy the spaces between the words. Pause occasionally to look around you. If you find yourself rushing through the book, ask yourself why. What do you want from it? What do you hope to get? What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for something to click, for some sort of intellectual understanding? For some sort of spiritual enlightenment to descend upon you in a flash of lightning?

Virtually every sentence in this book is pointing back to the same thing, a thing which isn't really a thing at all. And if you don't get it from the first page of the book, you won't get it at all. Because really there's nothing to get. But as long as there is the belief that there is something to get, there will appear to be something to get. Get it?

Yes, what we're talking about here is really as *simple* as doing the dishes, as *obvious* as the sound of the rain falling on the roof, as *ordinary* as going to the toilet. It's so simple, obvious and ordinary, in fact, that it's nearly always

overlooked. And when this simplicity is seen, there can be much laughter.



The three sections of this book represent three aspects of liberation. Part One reflects the utter simplicity and obviousness of liberation: it is *this, here, now* – no attainment necessary. Part Two contains expressions of the undeniable sense of freedom and release that may arise as the existence of the apparent individual is seen through. Part Three reflects the way in which liberation seemingly permeates the apparent life story of the individual. As seeking subsides, certain aspects of life are seen in new ways. It is not a rejection of the life story, but a seeing through of its apparent solidity. Additionally, there are two sections of dialogues about the search for liberation, enlightenment, happiness, God, Nirvana, a bigger bank balance.

And now, on with the show!

## PART ONE

### Liberation: Here and Now

*“I have never wanted to live seriously. I’ve been able to put on a show – to know pathos, and anguish, and joy. But never, never have I known seriousness. My whole life has been just a game: sometimes long and tedious, sometimes in bad taste – but a game.”*

Jean-Paul Sartre

## Hooked on Enlightenment

“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.”

*Shakespeare, As You Like It*

I first appeared on the stage of life some twenty-seven years ago. I played many parts: a shy and introverted child, a painfully self-conscious teenager, and then, in a performance worthy of an Academy Award, a horribly confused and depressed twenty-something experiencing existential crisis after existential crisis. For most of my childhood and early adulthood, I lived completely “in my head”, lost in my problems, plagued by self-loathing.

Then one day in my mid-twenties, following a deep depression that nearly drove me to suicide, I caught the spiritual bug. At last, I’d had enough of my misery, enough of my intense self-consciousness, enough of myself! I wanted to escape from it all. I wanted spiritual enlightenment, liberation, release from all my suffering. I wanted to transcend the ego, to lose my self, to merge with God and leave this miserable human life behind. The choice was clear: spiritual enlightenment or suicide. And I couldn’t bear the thought of suicide.

And so I ploughed through hundreds of religious and spiritual books by dozens of wise men, gurus, teachers and

heavily bearded philosophers. And I read and read, and took up meditation, and ate vegetarian food, and listened to poor quality audio recordings of peaceful Indian men telling me what a wonderful thing it was to have a silent mind. And yet, no matter what I did or didn't do, the yearning to be free still burned as fiercely as ever. I couldn't seem to shake it off, no matter how hard I tried.

One question drove me: How could I attain this state of perfect stillness and peace that people had spoken about throughout the ages? I certainly had moments of peace, stillness and clarity, but I so desperately wanted to make this permanent. I didn't just want peace, I wanted peace with cherries on top.

How could I dwell in Heaven all the time? How could I escape from my ordinary life once and for all? How could I be free from myself and all of my so-called "psychological baggage"?

I was hooked on enlightenment.



Fast forward to today, and the search is over, or more accurately, it has been seen through. Or, more accurately, it *is* being seen through, now, now and now.

*There is, of course, no such thing as enlightenment.* And that comes as a shattering blow when you've been seeking enlightenment with all your heart, soul and might for as long as you can remember. The spiritual search ends with this shattering realisation: that there was never anything to find in the first place.

I saw it so clearly: there was nothing to find, because nothing had ever been lost. Absolute freedom had been with me from the very beginning. Indeed, it was my true nature, but it had been obscured for a lifetime by the endless goal-seeking of the monkey mind. My desperate search for spiritual enlightenment had just been an extension of the lifelong search for something more, something other than *what is*.

And yet, it had all played itself out perfectly, and not a thing had been out of place. That was clear, too.

All depression and self-consciousness lifted, never to return, and in the place of misery and frustration there was, and still is, only spaciousness, only openness, only unconditional love, a love that allows everything to be exactly as it is, a love that embraces life in all its imperfection.



When the search for enlightenment collapses, when the mind exhausts itself and gives up, it is clearly seen: enlightenment can never be found, because it was never lost. And in this clear seeing, there is a freedom and a clarity that could never be found by the seeking mind. It's the ultimate paradox: enlightenment is the seeing-through of the search for enlightenment.

And so really, despite what we believe, there is no ultimate state, no way to meditate one's way to Nirvana, no way to get rid of the ego. *These are just more desires of the ego, more ways to maintain the separate self-sense, the sense of "I".* In searching for enlightenment, the mind keeps itself

alive, makes itself stronger. What a wonderful game the mind plays, in its desperate attempt to stay alive.



After years of searching and never finding, the futility of it all is eventually seen through. This ordinary life is already what we are looking for, and already, in this moment, there is a perfection that could never be seen by the seeking mind. And this is so damn difficult to see when we are walking down a spiritual path, because any path to freedom implies by its very existence that freedom is *not* here, that liberation is *not* this, that this moment is *not* enough. But truth is a pathless land.



It seems that we want and need a future in which there is some happiness better than the present happiness. The idea that this is all there is, that this moment is life's only meaning, is very challenging to a mind locked into the idea of a future salvation. "*This? This can't be it!*", we cry.

But this is it. What is happening presently is *all that could possibly be happening*. This is liberation, enlightenment, God, call it what you will. And the great spiritual teachers, mystics and poets throughout the ages have been trying to tell us this, but we just couldn't hear them. Jesus saw it. The Buddha saw it.



And I'll say this again and again: none of this can be understood on an intellectual level, or for that matter, on any level at all. The drive to understand this would just be more seeking. "When I understand this, all seeking will fall away and I'll be enlightened", we say to ourselves. But the current lack of understanding is yet another present appearance, and that too is liberation, enlightenment, God.



And so these days, there is just the living of a very ordinary life, with no desire to reach some higher plane of existence, find my True Self, or become one with God.

And it's so obvious now: *This ordinary life is all there is, or ever was.* And in this ordinary life, there is such an extraordinary presence, an openness, an aliveness which means that nothing is ever really ordinary at all. It's all God. Freedom. Perfect in its imperfection.

## The End of the Search

Freedom is to be found nowhere else but here: right in front of us.

And this is what freedom looks like:

*The low hum of the computer fan.*

*A tingling feeling in the left foot.*

*The tweet-tweet of the little birds in the garden, hopping from branch to branch...*

Why are we never satisfied with *this*? Why is this moment never enough?

Perhaps it is because at some point in our lives we picked up the belief that there exists something More Than This, something higher, something more meaningful than what is already the case, some sort of state in which our True Nature is revealed to us in all its glory, in which all thoughts dissolve, in which the ego burns up and vanishes, in which the ground we stand upon opens up, and with fire and gnashing of teeth, the Eternal reveals itself, for a while at least.

But what reality does any of that have? Right now, for me, there is only the sound of the little robin jumping about in the tree over there, only the beating of the heart, only the vapour rising from a freshly brewed cup of tea, only

the morning breeze gently caressing my cheek. And this is Heaven. This is God. This is the Eternal.

And then a thought arrives: “there must be more to life than this!” Thought cannot bear the simplicity of *what is* for long!

But even the thought “there must be more to life than this” is just a thought, a present thought, as all thoughts are. Just another appearance in awareness, just another form arising. And all forms arise and dissolve in the Presence that you are, and Presence remains untouched. This clarity could never be disturbed by any passing thought.



*All thoughts are present thoughts. All sounds are present sounds, all sights are present sights.* How wonderful: the present can never be escaped, and can never be lost. Thought is just the *illusion* of past and future.

And if there is only ever the present, then this state of enlightenment, of liberation, or whatever you want to call it, must be achieved in the present. Which is to say, *it cannot be achieved at all*. Because an achievement implies time, implies a self. Someone to achieve, and a time when it will be achieved.

Hopeless, hopeless, hopeless!



There is only ever now. There is only ever this. The search

for something other than this is a denial of the undeniable *thisness* of this, the undeniable presence of it all. The search for enlightenment is a denial of the enlightenment that *always already* is. The search for Oneness is a denial of ... oh, you get the idea.

And the paradox goes even deeper. Because even the search for Oneness, for liberation, for release, for freedom... even the search is simply an expression of Oneness, liberation, release, freedom.

It cannot be found, it cannot be escaped, it cannot be avoided. It is unconditional and free. It is the banquet that is always overlooked by a hungry mind.

Ignore it, and Oneness is ignoring Oneness. Try to find it, and it is Oneness trying to find Oneness.

So what to do?

Is there still seeking?

That's fine.

Is there still pain?

That's fine too.

Is there suffering, hope, despair?

That's all fine. Nothing else is needed. Nothing more, nothing less. Already, the "you" at the core of your life is just an idea, a phantom, a thought. Already, life simply plays

itself out, perfectly, and you are not doing it. Already, there is freedom from the burden of volition. Already, there is liberation from “me”.

Already, the search is over. And yet, the mind cannot hear that. The mind so desperately wants to seek, because in that seeking, it keeps itself alive. To the mind, the end of seeking is a kind of death.

But the mind does its job perfectly. It seeks exactly to the extent that it must. The good news is that this seeking really has nothing to do with you. The seeking of the mind simply arises in this open space, in this presence that accepts everything, literally everything, unconditionally, lovingly, freely. And this is what you are.

And so the end of the spiritual search is a radical, radical acceptance of what is. And this acceptance, this seeing through, is not done by you. This acceptance is not a doing, not an achievement, not the result of anything. This acceptance is the nature of things, already. Already, everything arises spontaneously, freely, of its own accord. Already, the Universe accepts everything, unconditionally, as it is. Already, as the Buddha saw so clearly, there is no separate self.

The heart beats, and you are not doing it.

Sounds arise, and you are not doing them.

Breathing happens, and you are not doing it.

Thoughts arise, and it's so obvious that you are not thinking

them. *If you were thinking them, you would simply be able to think your way to perfection!*

Obviously, this is not the case. The Buddha saw this too.

And so the heart beats, and sounds arise, and breathing happens, and thoughts arise, and it's all just a wonderful, spontaneous play of the divine. And the mind will carry on seeking, until it doesn't. The seeking of the mind is simply part of what happens. And that's not a problem, until "you" want to be free from it!

I'm not telling you to give up the search. There is no condemnation of seeking here. Even seeking is happening exactly as it should. Perfectly appropriate, all of it.



So, there may be a seeing through, or there may not. There may be absorption in the search, or there may be a sense of ease, a feeling of release. It's all fine, it's all wonderful, it's all part of the play.

And there may be a little robin hopping from branch to branch, and it may be seen that there is *only* the robin, there is *only* the hop-hop-hopping, there is *only* the tweet-tweet. And all of it is Oneness. Without beginning or end. Without purpose or goal or meaning.

The little robin doesn't care about finding itself, or reaching a state of liberation. For it, just the hopping, just the search for the next worm is enough. Perhaps that's why we're so drawn to nature. Animals seem to be so free of the burden

of individuality, of selfhood, of the search for something more meaningful than what is already the case.

But really, the great liberation is already here, for all of us. This – what is already clearly given in this moment – is all the meaning there is. This – sitting on the toilet, or eating lunch, or buying bread and milk from the local shop – is all the purpose there is. And to the mind, that can sound very depressing. To what you really are, it's explosively liberating.

It is the very search for purpose that creates purposelessness, and it is the search for meaning that creates meaninglessness.



This seeing is not an achievement, it is not the result of a long struggle, it has nothing to do with intelligence or skill or knowledge. It has nothing to do with cause or effect, with effort or persistence or anything else.

Freedom and enlightenment are to be found nowhere else but here. Which is to say, they cannot be “found” at all.