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When Freedom Becomes Another Prison: Reflections on Work, Attachment, and the Search for the DAO

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Perspective Article

Abstract

Freedom is a universal aspiration, yet its meaning changes with the life from which it is viewed. For some, freedom means financial independence and release from corporate schedules; for others, it means living without a spouse, children, social supervision, or obligations that dictate how time and money must be used. This perspective argues that every apparent liberation can generate another attachment. The employee may be bound to a corporation, while the entrepreneur becomes bound to a system of his own making, including payroll, clients, operating costs, ambition, and the fear of decline. The same paradox appears in family life, social expectations, religious accountability, and even the desire to be recognised as free. Human beings therefore seem to move not from bondage to absolute liberty, but from one form of attachment to another. From the author's perspective, freedom is the occasional capacity to do what one genuinely wishes without hesitation, obstruction, or submission to the judgement of others, while possessing the practical ability to act. Yet even this definition can become another prison when it is defended as an identity. The search for freedom may therefore culminate not in escape from life, but in finding a path - the Dao - through which one can move among obligations without being entirely possessed by them.

Keywords: *freedom; financial freedom; self-bondage; corporate work; responsibility; social expectation; Dao*

1. INTRODUCTION

Freedom is among the most persistent desires of human life. Nearly everyone wishes to be free, yet people rarely mean the same thing when they use the word. One person locates freedom in wealth; another in solitude; another in marriage, family, faith, mobility,

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or the absence of supervision. The concept appears universal, but its practical meaning is shaped by the burden from which each person wishes to escape. Consequently, freedom is not experienced as a single condition. It appears in multiple forms, each defined by a particular history of pressure, expectation, fear, and longing.

Modern life often treats freedom as release from external control. A person is considered free when no employer determines the hours of the day, no partner questions personal choices, no child creates long-term financial obligations, and no neighbour or relative is permitted to dictate the direction of life. Yet this apparently simple definition immediately produces a difficulty. When one authority disappears, another frequently takes its place. The individual escapes the employer but becomes answerable to clients; escapes a fixed salary but becomes dependent on market performance; escapes a family obligation but remains exposed to social judgement, loneliness, or uncertainty.

This article begins from that paradox. It does not claim that all lives are equally constrained, nor that economic security, autonomy, and personal choice are meaningless. Rather, it asks a more fundamental question: can human beings ever become completely free, or do they merely exchange one enclosure for another? The question extends from work to family, from the body to the mind, and from worldly responsibility to religious accountability. At every level, freedom appears beside attachment, and liberation appears beside a newly created duty.

The author's perspective is that absolute freedom may not exist as a stable condition in this world. What may exist is a limited but genuine interval in which a person can act according to a true desire, without hesitation, obstruction, or submission to the judgement of others. Such freedom is temporary and fragile, but it is not therefore insignificant. It may be the most honest form of freedom available to a human being who remains embedded in work, relationships, belief, and consequence.

2. THE PROMISE AND PARADOX OF FINANCIAL FREEDOM

One of the most influential modern definitions of freedom is financial freedom. It describes a condition in which a person no longer depends on active labour to meet ordinary needs. The individual may have worked intensely from youth into later adulthood, accumulated capital, purchased shares or bonds, and built a portfolio capable of producing dividends, yields, interest, or other forms of recurring income. In the ideal image, such a person is no longer required to enter an office at eight in the morning and remain there until five in the afternoon. The corporate schedule has lost its authority.

This condition appears to be liberation because time is no longer exchanged directly for a monthly salary. The financially independent person can wake without an alarm imposed by an employer, travel without requesting formal leave, and refuse work that conflicts with personal preference. Money becomes not merely a means of consumption but a protective distance between the individual and compulsory labour. From the outside, the achievement seems to resolve the central problem of modern work: the sale of one's waking life in order to survive.

Yet the attainment of financial freedom does not necessarily end the desire to work. A person who is no longer required to labour may encounter boredom, purposelessness, or the discomfort of unused capacity. The hours once occupied by corporate routines become open space, and open space can itself become difficult to inhabit. Some therefore return to productive activity, not because they lack money, but because they seek movement, meaning, recognition, or the satisfaction of generating further income.

At this point, the financially free individual may establish a company. The intention is often to create a system that generates money while preserving personal independence. However, the moment that system includes employees, managers, directors, suppliers, clients, and operating costs, it creates a network of recurring obligations. Salaries must be paid regardless of the founder's mood. Clients expect answers. Complaints must be handled. Rent, technology, taxes, production, and administration continue to demand

attention. A structure created to protect freedom begins to govern the person who created it.

Investment income is also less absolute than the language of financial freedom sometimes suggests. Markets rise and fall; companies alter payout policies; portfolio values contract; and business cycles can weaken both capital and expected distributions. A decline in an index such as the IHSG or the S&P 500 does not mechanically reduce every dividend, but it can reveal how dependent the ideal of passive income remains on corporate performance, profitability, and market confidence. The person who believed that work had ended may feel compelled to enlarge a business, increase revenue, or search for additional income in order to protect an established standard of living.

Financial freedom can therefore become a circular journey. The individual works for years to escape compulsory labour, becomes financially independent, grows restless, builds a company, and then accepts obligations more extensive than those previously imposed by an employer. Freedom from the corporation produces responsibility for a corporation. The former employee becomes the owner, but ownership does not eliminate servitude; it changes its source.

3. TWO FORMS OF SERVITUDE: CORPORATE AND SELF-IMPOSED

This paradox suggests two broad forms of servitude. The first is corporate servitude: the condition in which a person works within a system designed by others. The employee accepts schedules, targets, performance measures, hierarchical authority, and the possibility that organisational decisions may override personal preference. Time is organised externally, and the limits of choice are visible.

The second is self-imposed servitude. Here, the individual appears autonomous because the system was created through personal choice. The entrepreneur sets the strategy, chooses the clients, and determines the formal working hours. Yet the pressure may be more severe because the system has no clear boundary. The employee can often leave the office at the end of the working day. The owner carries the office internally. Problems travel to the dining table, the bedroom, the weekend, and the holiday.

A person working for a corporation may begin at nine in the morning, leave at five in the afternoon, work from Monday to Friday, and receive only a modest or minimum wage. Nevertheless, that person may not complain and may experience the routine as a form of stability. The workday has an ending. Responsibility is limited to a role. After leaving the workplace, the individual may return to a private life that is not continuously occupied by the survival of the organisation.

By contrast, a person working for himself may be active from morning until night and from one morning into the next. Client complaints remain personal. Delayed payments threaten payroll. Operational errors become moral burdens because other people depend upon the company. Even when the owner faces these difficulties with enthusiasm, determination, and pride, the intensity of the obligation remains. The absence of an employer does not mean the absence of command; ambition, reputation, and responsibility can issue orders more forcefully than a corporate superior.

Neither condition is automatically superior. Corporate employment can be restrictive but bounded; entrepreneurship can be autonomous but limitless in its demands. The point is not to romanticise the employee or condemn the owner. It is to recognise that every occupational arrangement contains a particular architecture of constraint. Each person inhabits a different prison, and the most dangerous prison may be the one that is interpreted as freedom simply because its walls were built by the prisoner.

This tension between external obligation, self-created duty, and the imagined open path is represented conceptually in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Freedom at the crossroads between corporate obligation, self-imposed responsibility, and the imagined open path

4. WORK, ROUTINE, AND UNRECOGNISED ATTACHMENT

The judgement that a salaried worker is unfree may itself arise from a particular perspective. To the entrepreneur, the fixed routine of the employee can look like unconscious captivity. To the employee, however, the same routine may provide predictability, social identity, and sufficient peace. A structure accepted without resentment is not experienced in the same way as a structure resisted every day. The external facts may be similar, but the internal meaning differs.

This difference raises a difficult question. Is freedom determined by objective conditions or by the consciousness with which those conditions are inhabited? A person may have limited income and restricted hours but feel content. Another may possess considerable wealth and formal autonomy yet remain dominated by anxiety, deadlines, and the fear of failure. The first person may appear constrained to an observer but feel psychologically free; the second may appear free but live under continuous internal command.

The problem becomes clearer during moments that are supposed to belong to life outside work. While eating, a person thinks about an unfinished task for a client. During a holiday, the mind returns to an unresolved issue at the office. While sitting with family, attention remains attached to messages, payroll, targets, and tomorrow's obligations. The body has left the workplace, but the workplace has not left the mind.

For this reason, freedom cannot be measured only by the ownership of time. A free afternoon is not genuinely free when it is occupied by guilt, anticipation, or fear. Conversely, a busy day may not feel like imprisonment when the activity is consciously chosen and experienced as meaningful. The decisive struggle may therefore occur less in the calendar than in the mind that interprets the calendar.

5. RELATIONSHIPS, FAMILY, AND SOCIAL EXPECTATION

The same ambiguity appears in personal relationships. A person without a spouse may describe himself as free because no partner questions where he has been, controls his schedule, criticises his choices, or requests money for household needs. He can return home without explanation and organise his life around personal preference. In this sense, singleness removes a visible form of interpersonal obligation.

Yet the absence of a spouse does not necessarily end social pressure. When the person reaches the age of thirty-five or forty, relatives and acquaintances may repeatedly

ask when marriage will occur. The individual is free from the authority of a partner but not from the expectations of family and society. A private decision becomes a public object of evaluation. Freedom from one relationship is accompanied by exposure to another form of control: the collective insistence that a proper life must follow a recognised sequence.

A similar pattern affects couples who decide to remain childfree. Without children, they may avoid the long-term financial, emotional, and practical responsibilities of parenting. They do not need to decide which school a child should attend, how tuition will be paid, how health and safety will be protected, or how the child's future will be prepared. Time and resources can be directed elsewhere.

Nevertheless, such couples may still hear persistent questions from neighbours and relatives: when will you have children, why have you not had children, and who will care for you in old age? The decision that was intended to preserve autonomy becomes the subject of repeated external judgement. They are free from the obligation of raising a child, but not from the demand to justify why that obligation was refused.

Those who choose marriage and parenthood enter a different set of attachments. Once a child exists, the parent cannot responsibly live only for personal desire. Education, health, protection, emotional care, and future opportunity must be considered. Money that could have served individual pleasure becomes part of a family calculation. Time that could have been used freely is reorganised around another person's dependence.

Yet it would be too simple to call every family duty imprisonment. People often accept such obligations voluntarily because love, belonging, and meaning are present within them. A father may work beyond comfort because he wants his child to receive a good education. A mother may surrender time not because her freedom has been stolen, but because care has become part of the life she has chosen. An attachment can restrict action while simultaneously giving purpose to action.

The deeper paradox is that every choice creates a responsibility to the choice itself. The person who establishes a company becomes responsible for employees. The person who marries becomes responsible to a partner. The person who has a child becomes responsible for care. The person who chooses solitude must accept the consequences of solitude. The individual is free at the moment of choosing, but the choice then becomes a structure that shapes future freedom.

6. DEATH, DIVINE ORDER, AND THE LIMITS OF ABSOLUTE FREEDOM

The question of freedom can be extended beyond economics and social life into a metaphysical hierarchy. If freedom is defined as the absence of work, responsibility, and attention to others, then one may ask whether such a condition exists at any level of being. Within Islamic belief, God neither slumbers nor sleeps and continuously sustains creation. Divine action cannot be equated with human labour, and the comparison is not intended to reduce the sacred to the economic. It serves only to sharpen the question: can existence itself be imagined as complete inactivity and total disengagement?

From the highest level that the human mind can contemplate to the most ordinary level of daily life, there appears to be movement, order, relation, and responsibility. Human beings work for wages, manage companies, care for families, maintain communities, and answer to faith. If every position within life contains a function, then freedom cannot simply mean the abolition of all function.

Death also does not necessarily provide absolute release. In the author's Islamic understanding, the body is returned to the earth, the spirit returns to Allah Taala, and the person remains accountable for the life that has been lived. The questioning associated with the angels Munkar and Nakir expresses that responsibility: who is your Lord, who is your Prophet, and what did you truly believe? Death ends worldly routines, but it does not erase moral consequence.

This perspective makes the language of total freedom even more difficult. During life, the human being is attached to work, family, society, desire, and fear. After death, the believer anticipates accountability. The enclosure changes, but responsibility does not disappear. Freedom cannot therefore be understood merely as departure from the world, because departure itself leads into another order of relation.

The conclusion is not that life is meaningless because it is bound. It is that attachment may be an unavoidable condition of existence. The serious question is not whether a person can remove every bond, but which bonds are chosen, which are imposed, which are meaningful, and which quietly consume the person who carries them.

7. THE DUALITY BETWEEN LIVING AND STRIVING

Many people imagine freedom as simple availability: the ability to eat when hungry, sleep when tired, travel when desired, and stop working when the mind requires rest. This definition has practical force because the inability to control basic time is one of the clearest experiences of constraint. A life in which every need must wait for permission can scarcely feel free.

Yet even when the external opportunity to rest exists, internal permission may be absent. A person eats while thinking about the task that must be completed. He travels while calculating what remains unfinished. He lies down but continues to negotiate with tomorrow. The physical act of rest occurs, but the mind remains employed.

Human life is therefore caught within a duality. On one side is the life that should be enjoyed: meals, travel, conversation, quiet, affection, and the experience of being present. On the other side is the life that must be defended and built: income, reputation, obligations, deadlines, education, health, and preparation for the future. Both are real, and neither can be permanently abandoned.

When a person chooses enjoyment, obligation produces guilt. When obligation dominates, the person fears that life itself is being missed. Work is undertaken in order to live, yet excessive work can remove the capacity to experience living. Rest is necessary in order to continue working, yet rest can be treated as a betrayal of the work that supports life.

This is not merely a problem of time management. It is a conflict between two interpretations of a good life. One says that life must be savoured before it ends. The other says that life must be secured through discipline and struggle. Freedom appears in the unstable space between them, never entirely belonging to either side.

8. FREEDOM AS AN OCCASIONAL SPACE OF SELF-DETERMINATION

For the author, freedom is the capacity to occasionally do what one genuinely wants to do without hesitation, without obstruction, and without allowing another person's perspective to determine the legitimacy of the act. It requires not only desire, but also the practical ability to act. A wish that cannot be realised remains imagination; freedom appears when the mind is willing and the person is capable.

The word occasionally is essential. No human being can live at every moment without responsibility, limitation, or consequence. Work continues. Families require care. Bodies become tired. Communities establish rules. Faith creates accountability. Absolute and permanent freedom would require the disappearance of nearly every relation through which human life becomes intelligible.

What remains possible is a protected interval. In that interval, the individual is not acting for a corporation, a client, a spouse, a relative, a neighbour, or a social expectation. The person chooses a meal, a journey, a period of silence, a form of work, or a moment of rest because it is genuinely desired. The act may be small, but it belongs to the self.

Such freedom is fundamentally mental. Wealth does not guarantee it because the wealthy person can be imprisoned by the fear of loss. Solitude does not guarantee it because the solitary person can be governed by social judgement or loneliness. Leisure does not guarantee it because empty time can be filled with anxiety. Conversely, a person with limited resources can sometimes experience freedom through contentment, clarity, and the ability to accept a chosen moment without comparison.

However, the definition contains its own danger. Once a person identifies strongly with being free, every commitment can begin to look like an enemy. Relationships are refused because they may impose responsibility. Work is rejected because it may structure time. Dependence is denied even when mutual dependence is part of care. The desire to protect freedom becomes a rigid command, and the concept designed to open life begins to close it.

Thus, even freedom can become a prison. The individual may spend so much effort preserving independence that independence becomes another master. The fear of being controlled controls the person. The refusal to be attached becomes an attachment to non-attachment. At that point, the walls are no longer constructed by a corporation, family, or society; they are constructed by the definition of freedom itself.

9. TOWARD THE DAO: A WAY THROUGH ATTACHMENT

The question then turns toward the Dao, the way. Can there be a path that does not demand total escape, yet allows a person to move without being completely governed by every obligation encountered? Can the Dao represent a way of living that is not built upon constant resistance to control? Related questions also arise across other spiritual languages: can there be a condition beyond samsara, karma, and repeated entanglement, or is such absolute release unavailable within ordinary worldly life?

In this reflection, the Dao is not presented as proof that every bond can be abolished. It appears instead as the possibility of walking through attachment with awareness. The path may not remove work, family, money, faith, or consequence. It may change the relationship between the self and those realities, so that the person participates without being entirely possessed.

This understanding prevents freedom from becoming mere flight. Escaping a corporation only to become enslaved by one's own company is not complete liberation. Escaping marriage only to become governed by the fear of social judgement is not complete liberation. Escaping responsibility only to become imprisoned by emptiness is not complete liberation. A path is needed that can hold action and rest, relation and solitude, ambition and sufficiency, without allowing one pole to erase the other.

Perhaps the search for the Dao occurs at the end of repeated disappointment with external definitions of freedom. Money, autonomy, solitude, work, family, and leisure each provide some liberty and create some enclosure. The path begins when the person recognises this pattern and stops expecting a single external arrangement to produce permanent emancipation.

10. CONCLUSION

Freedom cannot be reduced to wealth, unemployment, singleness, childlessness, leisure, or the absence of supervision. Each condition may remove a particular burden, but each can also generate a new form of attachment. The financially independent person can become responsible for a company. The entrepreneur can become a servant of a system created in the name of autonomy. The unmarried person can remain bound by social expectation. The person without children can still be required to defend that decision. The believer does not imagine death as the end of accountability.

Human beings may therefore never become absolutely free. They move among different obligations, choosing some, inheriting others, and resisting those that threaten to

consume the whole self. Every life has a prison, although the material of its walls differs: salary, ambition, love, fear, reputation, duty, belief, or the need to appear independent.

For the author, the most realistic freedom is the occasional ability to do what one truly wishes without hesitation, obstruction, or surrender to the judgement of others, while possessing the means to act. This freedom is temporary, but its temporary character does not make it false. It is a moment in which the person can breathe outside the commands of the systems that ordinarily organise life.

Even then, the person eventually returns to work, family, responsibility, faith, and consequence. The final task may not be to escape every prison forever, but to recognise the prison, understand why one remains inside it, and preserve the ability to step beyond it from time to time. At the end of that search lies the Dao: not necessarily a world without attachment, but a way of moving through attachment without allowing it to own the whole of one's being.

Competing Interests Disclaimer

The author has declared that no known competing financial interests, non-financial interests, or personal relationships could have appeared to influence the perspective presented in this article.

Author's Note

This article is a reflective perspective based on the author's personal reasoning and lived observations. It does not report empirical research and does not claim that a single definition of freedom applies universally.