

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Self-Reliance: Learning to Trust the Voice Within

January 6, 2019



Today we're going to be talking about the practice of self-reliance and learning to follow the guidance from our own deep intelligence. Like many of you, I first came across the term self-reliance through the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who coined it in his essay *Self-Reliance* back in 1834.

Emerson was America's first philosopher/poet. He was a third-generation Unitarian minister who was actually forced to give up his congregation after a series of personal tragedies plunged him into a spiritual crisis when he was twenty-seven years old. He had lost the love of his life to tuberculosis and he was living in poverty and he was also doubting his path as a minister.

This crisis led to a mystical awakening that finally gave rise to the realization in Emerson that human beings are born for transcendence. What did he mean by transcendence?

When we talk about what we are born to transcend, we're talking about the small ego, the mind's stories, the tyranny of other people, the need for church intermediaries to connect us to the godhead. These are the things that Emerson wanted to move us toward transcending.

This realization gave rise, in fact, to the Transcendentalist movement in America, which was still a very young country. And, of course, transcendence was nothing new. Eastern philosophies had taught for millennia that god could be found within and that each of us needs to become a lamp unto ourselves.

But in Puritan America, early nineteenth century, this was radical, new information and, in fact, they used to call Emerson the "Hindoo-Yankee" because he loved the Bhagavad Gita. In any case, he was the first who had the nerve, the wherewithal, or simply the duty to inject transcendental thought into this country and he called the path to awakening this transcendent self, self-reliance.

Now self-reliance as it was originally intended wasn't a selfish pursuit. In a secular culture we tend to hear self-reliance and think self-centeredness. That is not what Emerson meant. As a deeply spiritual person, Emerson saw self-reliance as inseparable from reliance on God, since human beings are inseparable from God.

These were heretical thoughts in his day. Know thyself and be a god, Emerson taught. And even today, we're likely to hear those words and hear hubris rather than divine humility when confronted by this idea that we are god in flesh. But that's because in a secular culture, we hear language through the ear of the ego.

But Emerson was speaking to another ear. He was speaking to the gnostic ear, the ear of God, the divine within us, that hears not only the words but what is beyond the words, in between the words.

Let's begin today by looking at four essential lessons in self-reliance. They are, number one, learning to trust your constitution; number two, learning that envy is ignorance and imitation is suicide; number three, learning that a person is what she or he thinks about all day; and number

four, learning that a stream of power runs through you as it does through all of life and that the presence of this stream is what sustains you, body and soul.

Let's begin with learning to trust our constitution. Each of us is born with a unique admixture of elements that make a human being. (This includes) the physical body with its particular nervous system and colorations. Also, the emotional body that we inherit as beneficiaries of a family legacy, with their wounds as well as their joys. As individuals, we begin to acquire tastes and proclivities and weaknesses and perspectives that are quite our own. This unique constellation of physical inheritance, emotional influence, and spiritual proclivity make up what we call our constitution.

You can think of it as the vehicle that you're riding in. Getting to know how it runs, what kind of fuel it needs, how it handles the road, how to cool it down and heat it up, where the exits are, how to steer it best, what to do when it swerves off the road. These are all good ideas when we're talking about this vehicle, the one and only vehicle that we have to navigate through this world. To become self-reliant is to be the driver of your own vehicle.

Let's say you're somebody who holds your breath through life. You're someone who runs yourself ragged and just spends way too much time managing your symptoms, kind of stumbling through your days, but never quite getting to the root of your anxiety. Many of us know folks like that. Many of us have been folks like that.

Only when you stop and turn off the motor and take a deep breath and actually look under the hood do you see that your actual problem is shortness of breath, not all of the projections and conceptualizations about shortness of breath, all of the objects that become our anxiety objects. Rather, it is actually shortness of breath that leads biologically to a state of anxiety and fear. It is impossible to stand on your own two feet when you're gulping for air and feeling shaky.

A person has to ground herself. And then it's necessary to examine your own constitution as dispassionately as possible, in order to enter into a more honest relationship with your natural being and trust in this voice of wisdom within.

Ask yourself, how familiar are you with your own constitution? Do you respect your own limitations? Do you honor the part of you that wants to stretch and aspire and not be limited by the past? In terms of self-care, do you know how to feed yourself best, physically, psychologically, spiritually?

And what kind of mind do you have? Is it a sharp mind, that's kind of rigid to a fault, judgmental, domineering? Or do you just space out and get lost and become confused and have difficulty making choices? Are you somebody who needs a great deal of space or are you a guy or a woman who prefers intense connection?

When it comes to the matter of spirit, what's your natural predilection? Are you attracted to ritual or are you turned off by form? Do you tend toward the mystic or the rational, the theological or the non-dual? Are you drawn to sitting in meditation or get nothing out of being

on a cushion? Is nature your teacher or is your heart open more by selfless service or by self-inquiry?

What is it that delights your mind and fills you with wonder? What connects you to the divine, that deeper, wider, brighter consciousness that's moving all of us through this world? What does your special animal like? What tools could you use to ground yourself, to strengthen your spine and to stand up a bit taller in your life?

These are critical questions to ask ourselves as we come to know our own constitution.

The next lesson is that a person is what he or she thinks about all day. Now this was Emerson's articulation of the ancient truth that what we call our identity is, in fact, a mental composition. As it says in Proverbs, as he thinketh in his heart, so is he. We create the world inside our own minds. Through these shifting lenses of perception, we manifest our thoughts and many of our feelings as well.

That's why the most effective use of our time is understanding that perspective, what Emerson called the angle of vision, understanding our angle of vision, really getting it, seeing how it tends to light the world, from what angles does it tend to look, what deductions does it tend to draw. Are they negative deductions, are they grandiose deductions? What kind of an eye do you use, how do you see? This is a critical question to understanding what's actually going on inside our own heads.

It sounds obvious that this is important. But, in fact, a majority of people don't put these two things together. As they see it, there's a world inside and there's a world outside and the two are fundamentally separate. There's an objective reality and a subjective reality, an empirical realm and a personal realm.

We like to think that the inner realm or perspective is a response to the outer, but we rarely consider that we're actually making the outer one up through the inner. When you come to realize that you are creating your reality, you see how extremely important it is to curate your point of view very, very carefully, because we're reactive, mirroring creatures, learning through imitation. We are incalculably influenced by what we pay attention to.

If you're somebody, for example, who longs for happiness but tends to spend your time surrounded by complaining, by people who can't be satisfied, it's a lot more likely that you're going to mirror and internalize that unhappiness without even knowing it. If you dwell on banality and pettiness and competition and fear, those are the qualities that you will become. If, on the other hand, you choose your input more carefully and you decide consciously what you want to take on and what is better avoided, your inner reality will reflect that self-care and so will your sense of wellbeing.

I work with a highly intelligent, quite successful woman, who lives an unusually self-aware life. Her existence is extremely curated, mostly harmonious, until she goes home to see her family, as happened recently during the holidays. I know many of you have had this kind of experience. When she's exposed to her parents, she completely loses her balance and gets carried away by

thoughts of the past. She says they drive her bat-shit crazy and that her mind becomes a kind of battleground. And then she said the most interesting thing. She said, “It’s like I can’t be myself around them.” Have you ever had that feeling? You can’t be yourself around them.

But what would it mean to say that we can’t be ourselves in one situation or another? What it means is that we can’t be the drivers of our vehicle. We lose our seat. We take our hands off the wheel of attention. We explode in anger or we swallow a bunch of feelings or memories or self-pity or blame. And all of these intense emotions tend to hijack our own self-reliance because they make us lose consciousness. My client loses sovereignty over her own mind. That’s exactly what happens. She becomes caught in obsession and trapped in stories of the past, and the person she is or believes that she is disappears, to be replaced by the repeating thoughts and feelings of this girl that she was when she lived in that troubled household. Every year she’s surprised by how quickly this happens, by how rapidly her strength just drains away and with it her sense of wellbeing.

The good news is that she’s been a seeker long enough that she understands the process, even though she can’t stop it from happening. I suggested to her that she try increasing her practice and bring a journal with her on her trip home, for example, and just do everything that she can to maintain her balance, to prepare herself for what she knows is going to come, rather than being led like a lamb to slaughter, which is how it can feel going home for the holidays sometimes. If you go home with love in your heart and you’re met with disappointment or rage or worse, we all know how that feels.

Far better to ask oneself, as I suggested she do, to name our primary triggers. What makes her most annoyed or sad or judgmental? Who is likely to anger her the most? And how could she navigate the time home with the least surprise and the most mastery?

I use that word deliberately, because mastery is exactly what tends to be needed when we regress psychologically, as happens often when we go to our family of origin. We tend to regress and what helps us snap out of that is our sense of mastery, our sense of self-reliance. It is gentle but extremely firm. So now she plans this coming 2019 holidays to go home as if she’s entering a lion’s den, she says, gently with love and boundaries, which I think sounds like a great recipe and I hope it works for her.

How is this for you? Are you somebody who is permeable and impressionable and likely to mirror inwardly what’s going on around you? Are you aware that this internalized reality and your thoughts about it come to define who you are, for better or for worse, that indeed you are nothing but a composite of this internal content?

When you consider this, how might you curate the contents of your own mind better, become your own ally, and stop nourishing the thoughts that belittle you or distort your essential wisdom and goodness? These are terrific questions to ask.

Now we come to the lesson of originality and allowing ourselves to be as unique as we actually are. And, of course, this is much harder than it might seem. As Emerson put it, “There’s a time in

every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance, that imitation is suicide."

The ability to reveal our colors and stop trying to be someone else is the work of a lifetime. As Emerson said elsewhere, "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you someone else is the greatest accomplishment."

We often underestimate just how powerful this inculcation is to conform, to behave, to fit in, to dim our light so as to not shine too brightly, to pretend to be someone other than who we are so that we don't get rejected by the group. We'll do almost anything not to become outsiders, including pretending to be someone else.

Our parents, of course, begin this process of acculturation from the cradle onward, teaching us to be part of the group. Indeed, much of what they call good parenting is training a child to be part of a group. And, of course, we need that. But we also need the freedom to explore, to take risks, and to be original and to not be afraid of what is unique about us, because that's how we lose our genius. As Buckminster Fuller put it, "Everyone is born a genius, but the process of living de-geniuses them." Isn't that great?

This mandate to imitate others then brings with it the built-in impulse toward envy. Envy arises from wanting what others have, whether or not it's something that belongs to us, literally or even imaginatively. Have you ever had that experience of wanting something that someone else had? Then you think about what it would really be like in your own life and that it wouldn't fit at all?

When you practice self-reliance, things other people are doing, what they have, what they know, become far less important to us.

I knew another guy who was the younger son of a very wealthy family and he was an unmarried musician, poet, and body worker. He had spent his entire lifetime in the shadows of his highly successful older brother, who was an entrepreneur and family man, just like their dad. For most of his life he was made to feel that he was an underachiever, somebody who had never found his way. And even though he didn't aspire to be a businessman, he did envy the approval that was showered on his brother and tried to imitate his strategy for life. So, he got married young, tried to start a family, only for it to end in divorce. He tried turning his yearly work into a business/business which just didn't feel right to him and failed as well.

He spent years blaming his family for this unhappiness before he saw that the punishment was coming from within, from ignoring his own constitution and the promptings of his own heart. Eventually with the help of a therapist, he has gotten clearer on what makes him tick. As this has happened, he not only feels steadier on his own feet, and more comfortable inside his own skin, but this internal wellbeing has been reflected in his work in the world, which has become steadily more popular. Now that he's not consumed by envy, he's been able to emerge in his own right, which in turn has brought what looks to be the first authentic and happy relationship of his life into his life. It's not the relationship that his parents or his brother might have wanted, but it's the one that works for him.

Ask yourself, is imitation a problem for you? Do you spend your time trying to mold yourself to meet other's expectations? Do you compare yourself negatively to others, who they are, or what they have? Do you feel like you're always coming up short and does that lead to envy and anger and bitterness? Or, are you able to stand firm on what's true for your own constitution, your own natural inheritance? Those are such different experiences.

Finally, we come to the last lesson of self-reliance that I wanted to talk to you about today and that is that a stream of power runs through you as it does through all of life. A stream of power runs through you as it does through all of life.

Most anybody hearing those words, particularly in this group, knows innately that they are true. When we recognize this cosmic stream, we know ourselves to be formed within that stream, unique, as vehicles of the divine, but sustained by the selfsame power that animates all of creation, because we don't live in an either/or universe. We inevitably live in paradox that we are both the vehicle and the stream, and this is essential to our maturity, emotional as well as spiritual.

When Emerson first wrote about self-reliance, he said nothing is so weak as an egotist and that only a fool fails to recognize his complete dependence on other people. So, while it's important to honor our particularity, it's a prison to believe that that's all we are. There's a big difference between viewing yourself as a separate ego in control of its destiny, a kind of autonomous personality swimming its way through the world, and as a unique gesture of the divine that's co-creating its experience with the cosmic force that's driving the whole operation.

Do you hear the difference? The first is self-centered and, ultimately, ignorant. And the second is directed towards humility and toward wisdom and the divine.

So, when we align ourselves with this universal power and we practice surrendering to where it's guiding us, we become larger than who we think we are and that is what leads us into the path of our own destiny, because the ego alone can't do it. Will alone does not make an authentic life. Will alone, will power, doesn't make an authentic life. Unless we're aligned with what life wants for us, we're only going to be chasing the carrots of the ego, which we imagine will complete us, but only actually leave us smaller and weaker and hungrier, less ourselves than before, hemmed in by our own insecurities.

What spiritual life invites us to do is take a giant step forward beyond this small vision and not be the prisoners of our own illusions. Whatever it takes to wake ourselves up from that misunderstanding and enter into this stream that's moving through us and moving all of creation is good practice.

That's what I wanted to say to you today about self-reliance.