


**The Concept of Liberty
in the Baha'i Teachings and its Application
for Environmental Sustainability**

IEF Webinar
2 December 2023

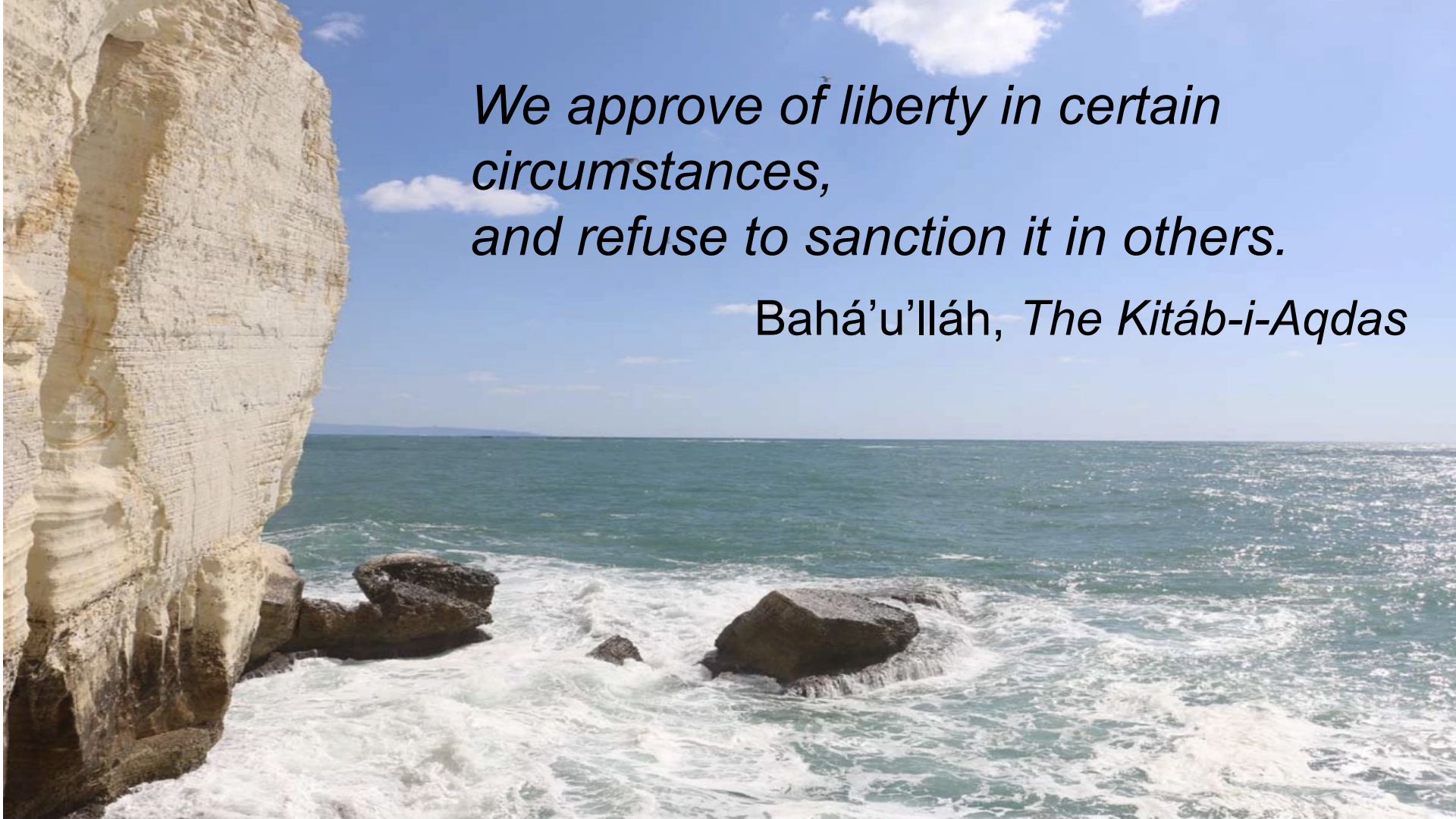
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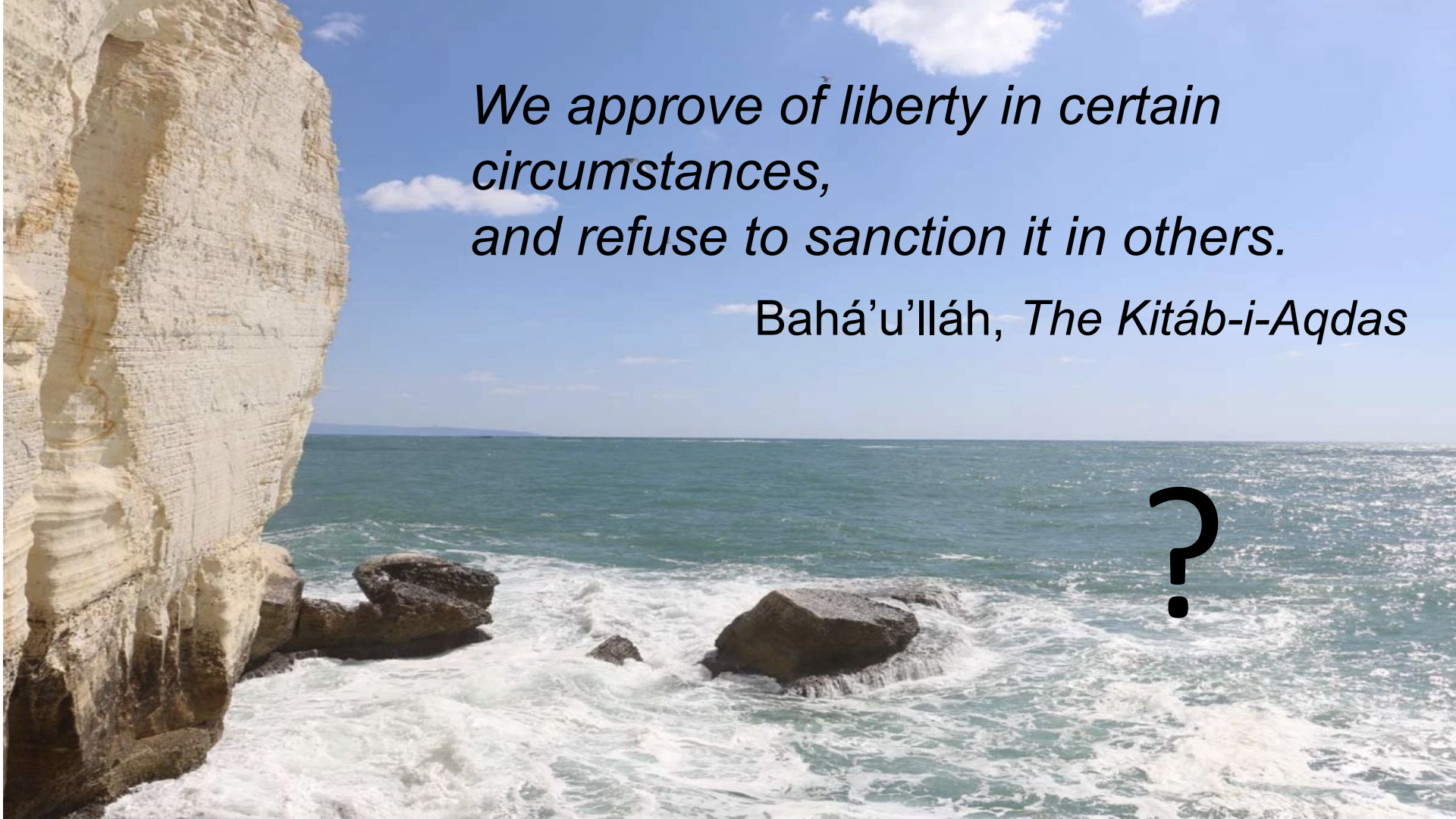
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*We approve of liberty in certain
circumstances,
and refuse to sanction it in others.*

*Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas**



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?

Outer Freedom (liberty)

Inner Freedom

Baha'i Teachings

Outer Freedom (liberty):

Sometimes strongly supported, sometimes restricted

Inner Freedom: No limits

Outer Freedom



Image by K. Mitch Hodge

Outer Freedom

For you have been and are now living in freedom, and you have no fear of anybody. Is there a greater blessing than this? Freedom! Liberty! Security! These are the great bestowals of God.

‘Abdu’l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 52

Outer Freedom Freedom from Oppression

O OPPRESSORS ON EARTH!

Withdraw your hands from tyranny, for I have pledged Myself not to forgive any man's injustice.

This is My covenant which I have irrevocably decreed in the preserved tablet and sealed with My seal of glory.

Baha'u'llah, The Hidden Words

Outer Freedom Freedom from Oppression

Thou must show forth that which will ensure the peace and the well-being of the miserable and the downtrodden.

Gird up the loins of thine endeavor, that perchance thou mayest release the captive from his chains, and enable him to attain unto true liberty.

Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, XLIII

Outer Freedom Freedom from Oppression - Prohibition of Slavery

It is forbidden you to trade in slaves, be they men or women.

It is not for him who is himself a servant to buy another of God's servants, and this hath been prohibited in His Holy Tablet. ...

Let no man exalt himself above another; all are but bondslaves before the Lord, and all exemplify the truth that there is none other God but Him.

Baha'u'llah, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas

Outer Freedom

Freedom of thought, belief and expression

Freedom of thought and speech enlarges the circle of one's understanding and leads to progress and unity.

'Abdu'l-Baha, Star of the West, Volume 1, p. 5.

Outer Freedom

Freedom of thought, belief and expression

Consider what a vast difference exists between modern democracy and the old forms of despotism. Under an autocratic government the opinions of men are not free, and development is stifled, whereas in democracy, because thought and speech are not restricted, the greatest progress is witnessed. It is likewise true in the world of religion. When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail — that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs — development and growth are inevitable.

‘Abdu’l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 197.

A scenic view of a rocky coastline. On the left, a tall, light-colored rock cliff rises vertically. The ocean is a deep teal color, with white foam from waves crashing against dark, jagged rocks in the foreground. The sky is a clear, bright blue with a few wispy white clouds. The overall atmosphere is one of natural beauty and freedom.

Outer Freedom
Freedom of thought, belief and expression

Oppression of Religion



Outer Freedom

When freedom of thought, belief and expression is oppressed

For whereas the [Baha'is] should obey the government under which they live, even at the risk of sacrificing all their administrative affairs and interests, they should under no circumstances suffer their inner religious beliefs and convictions to be violated and transgressed by any authority whatever.

A distinction of a fundamental importance must, therefore, be made between spiritual and administrative matters. Whereas the former are sacred and inviolable and hence cannot be subject to compromise, the latter are secondary and can consequently be given up and even sacrificed for the sake of obedience to the laws and regulations of the government.

From a letter to an individual Baha'i written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 11 February 1934

Example of the Baha'is in Iran



Outer Freedom / Liberty must be restricted in some circumstances

Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench.

... Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal. That which beseemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance, and guard him against the harm of the mischief-maker.

Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness.

Two Reasons to Restrict Outer Freedom/Liberty

1. to protect humans from their own ignorance
2. to guard them against the harm of the mischief-maker

The Importance of Laws



The Law must reign, and not the individual; thus will the world become a place of beauty and true brotherhood will be realized. Having attained solidarity, men will have found truth.

‘Abdu’l-Baha, Paris Talks

The Importance of Laws

- Just laws can help reduce actions that are harmful to others and can protect society from criminal behavior.
- Laws can also prevent individuals to gain too much power that would allow them to oppress others.
- Secular and religious laws

Limits set by Moderation

Whatsoever passeth beyond the limits of moderation will cease to exert a beneficial influence.

Consider for instance such things as liberty, civilization and the like. However much men of understanding may favourably regard them, they will, if carried to excess, exercise a pernicious influence upon men.

Baha'u'llah, LAWḤ-I-DUNYÁ

Limits set by Moderation

Baha'i Consultation:

Free expression,
but moderated by courtesy
and consideration



Human Nature

All created things are captives of nature and subject to its laws. They cannot transgress the control of these laws in one detail or particular.

The infinite starry worlds and heavenly bodies are nature's obedient subjects. The earth and its myriad organisms, all minerals, plants and animals are thralls of its dominion.

But man through the exercise of his scientific, intellectual power can rise out of this condition, can modify, change and control nature according to his own wishes and uses. ...

'Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace

Science and technology increase humans' outer freedom



Inner Freedom

True freedom can only be achieved with spiritual development.

Like a butterfly that emerges from a cocoon, we must learn to free ourselves from our animal instincts and let our soul take charge of our lives. For the butterfly, this is a once in a lifetime event while our spiritual development is an unending journey.

This brings us to the concept of **inner freedom**.



Inner Freedom

Oh, how blessed the day when, aided by the grace and might of the one true God, man will have freed himself from the bondage and corruption of the world and all that is therein, and will have attained unto true and abiding rest beneath the shadow of the Tree of Knowledge!

Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah XXXIV

Inner Freedom

...every human being is limited through his physical body, but his spirit is free.

The body of man may travel for a few miles and become fatigued, but the spirit untrammelled may go throughout the immensity of space.

While walking on earth man's thoughts may grasp the motions of the heavenly bodies and define their course. This demonstrates how man's spirit transcends his environment.

'Abdu'l-Baha, Divine Philosophy, p. 168

Do Humans have a Free Will?



Do Humans have a Free Will?

Is man free and unconstrained in all his actions, or is he compelled and constrained?

... Certain matters are subject to the free will of man, such as acting with justice and fairness, or injustice and iniquity—in other words, the choice of good or evil actions. It is clear and evident that the will of man figures greatly in these actions.

But there are certain matters where man is forced and compelled, such as sleep, death, sickness, failing powers, misfortune, and material loss: These are not subject to the will of man and he is not accountable for them, for he is compelled to endure them.

But he is free in the choice of good and evil actions, and it is of his own accord that he performs them.

'Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions

The Ego - the Prison of Self

O My Servant!

*Free thyself from the fetters of this world,
and loose thy soul from the prison of self.*

*Seize thy chance, for it will come to thee
no more.*

Bahá'u'lláh, the Hidden Words, Part Two: From the
Persian: Number 40



Two Meanings of the Word “Self”

Regarding the questions you asked: self has really two meanings, or is used in two senses, in the Bahá'í writings;

one is self, the identity of the individual created by God. This is the self mentioned in such passages as "he hath known God who hath known himself", etc.

The other self is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on. It is this self we must struggle against, or this side of our natures, in order to strengthen and free the spirit within us and help it to attain perfection.

From a letter dated 10 December 1947 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

Two Meanings of the Word “Self”

Self-sacrifice means to subordinate this lower nature and its desires to the more godly and noble side of our selves.

Ultimately, in its highest sense, self-sacrifice means to give our will and our all to God to do with as He pleases. Then He purifies and glorifies our true self until it becomes a shining and wonderful reality.

(From a letter dated 10 December 1947 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

Inner Freedom - True Liberty

True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it.

Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. ...

Baha'u'llah, The Kitab-i-Aqdas, # 125

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Baha'u'llah, The Kitab-i-Aqdas, # 125

Inner Freedom

Arise, O people, and, by the power of God's might, resolve to gain the victory over your own selves, that haply the whole earth may be freed and sanctified from its servitude to the gods of its idle fancies—gods that have inflicted such loss upon, and are responsible for the misery of their wretched worshippers.

These idols form the obstacle that impedeth man in his efforts to advance in the path of perfection. ...

Bahá'u'lláh / 7. Lawḥ-i-Dunyá

Inner Freedom

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Bahá'u'lláh / 7. Lawḥ-i-Dunyá

Inner Freedom

Protect us, we beseech Thee, O my Lord, from the hosts of idle fancies and vain imaginations. Thou, in truth, art the Mighty, the All-Knowing.

Baha'u'llah, Long Obligatory Prayer



How can we free ourselves from our lower self, the ego and find our true self?



How can we free ourselves from our lower self, the ego and find our true self?

The more we search for ourselves, the less likely we are to find ourselves; and the more we search for God, and to serve our fellow-men, the more profoundly will we become acquainted with ourselves, and the more inwardly assured. This is one of the great spiritual laws of life.

Shoghi Effendi , Lights of Guidance, p. 114

How can we free ourselves from our lower self, the ego
and find our true self?

O people of God! Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men. ...

Bahá'u'lláh / 7. Lawḥ-i-Dunyá

How can we free ourselves from our lower self, the ego and find our true self?

- Turning our focus from the “me” to the “we”
- developing a world-embracing view
- a spirit of service
- active involvement in society.

How can we free ourselves from our lower self, the ego
and find our true self?

The liberty that profiteth you is to be found nowhere except in complete servitude unto God, the Eternal Truth. Whoso hath tasted of its sweetness will refuse to barter it for all the dominion of earth and heaven.”

Baha'u'llah, The Kitab-i-Aqdas, # 125

Freeing ourselves from our ego is a life-long process.

... the complete and entire elimination of the ego would imply perfection – which man can never completely attain – but the ego can and should be ever-increasingly subordinated to the enlightened soul of man. This is what spiritual progress implies.

From letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, December 19, 1941, Living the Life
p. 7, Lights of Guidance # 479, p. 175

Our Inner Freedom cannot be taken away from us.



Our Inner Freedom cannot be taken away from us.

I myself was in prison forty years—one year alone would have been impossible to bear—nobody survived that imprisonment more than a year! But, thank God, during all those forty years I was supremely happy! Every day, on waking, it was like hearing good tidings, and every night infinite joy was mine. Spirituality was my comfort, and turning to God was my greatest joy. If this had not been so, do you think it possible that I could have lived through those forty years in prison?

‘Abdu’l-Baha, Paris Talks

Our Inner Freedom cannot be taken away from us.

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.

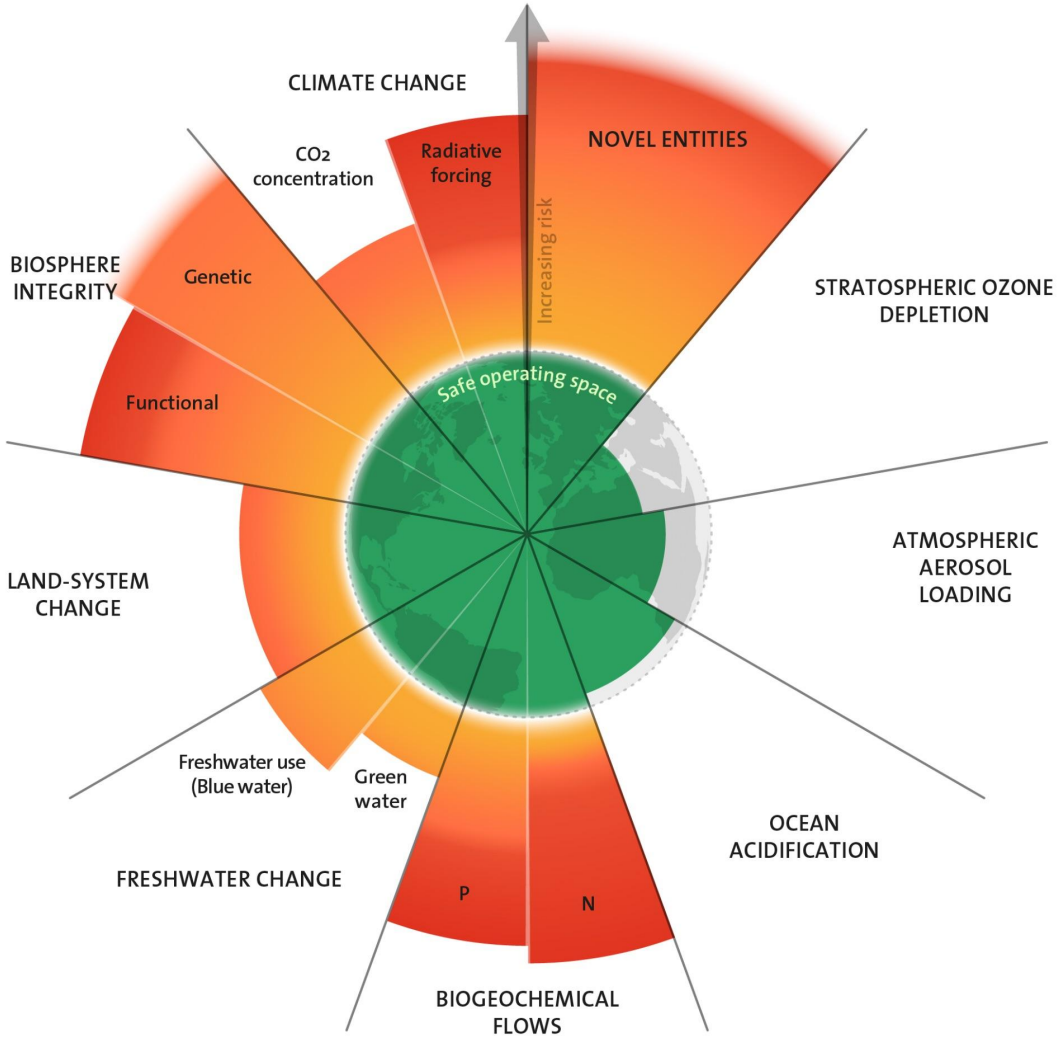
Viktor Frankl, in *Man's Search for Meaning*



Environmental Sustainability



Planetary Boundaries



Baha'i Teachings on Freedom

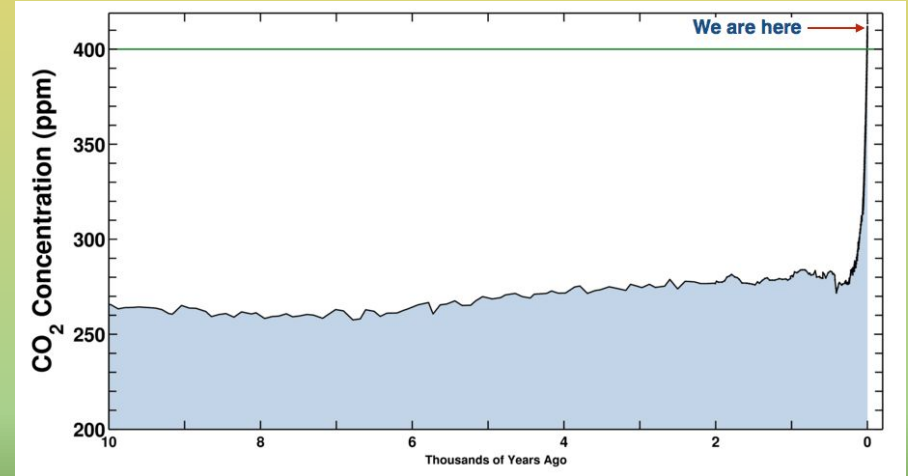


Climate Change

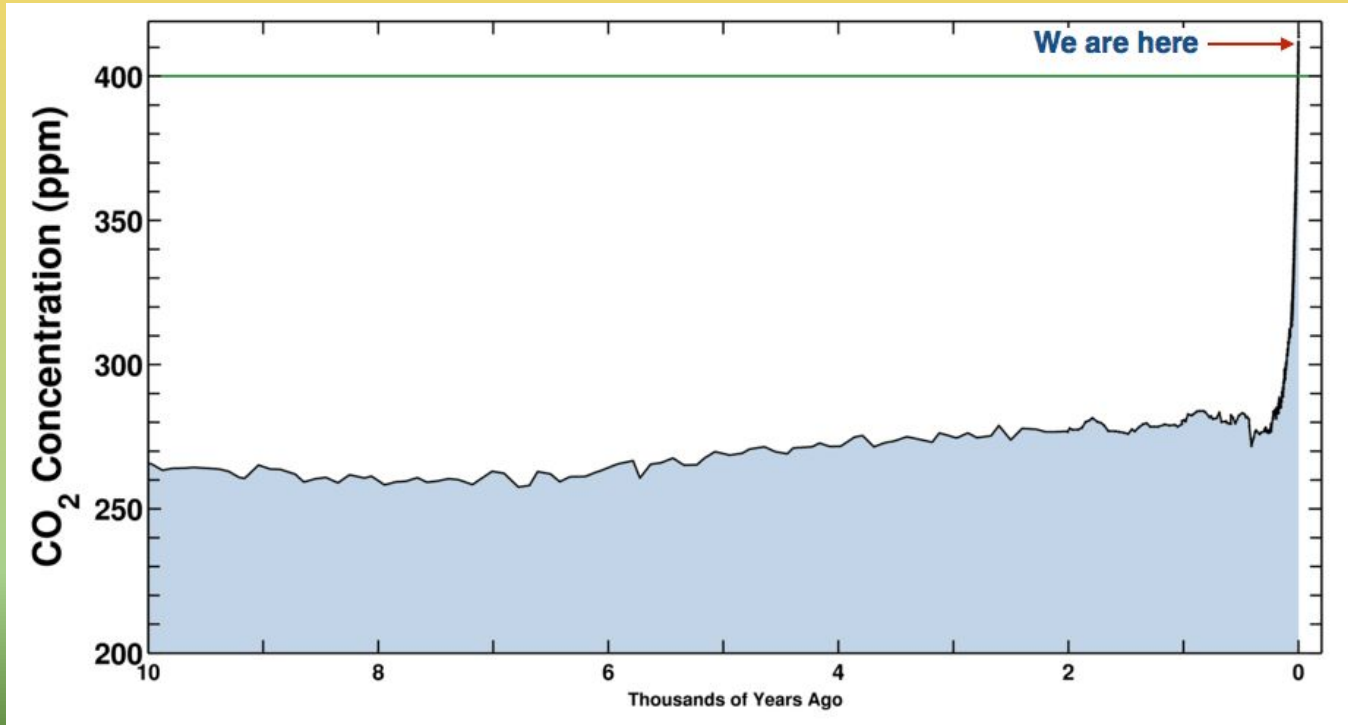


Loss of Biodiversity

Climate Change



Climate Change



The Need for Moderation in Civilization

Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation.... The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. ...If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation.The day is approaching when its flame will devour the cities, ...”

Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

The Car - a False Symbol of Freedom



Inner Freedom

Every man of insight will, in this day, readily admit that the counsels which the Pen of this Wronged One hath revealed constitute the supreme animating power for the advancement of the world and the exaltation of its peoples.

*Arise, O people, and, by the power of God's might, resolve to gain the victory over your own selves, that haply **the whole earth may be freed and sanctified from its servitude to the gods of its idle fancies**—gods that have inflicted such loss upon, and are responsible for the misery of their wretched worshippers.*

These idols form the obstacle that impedeth man in his efforts to advance in the path of perfection. ...

Bahá'u'lláh / 7. Lawḥ-i-Dunyá

The Need for Moderation in Civilization

- The liberty/freedom to release greenhouse gases requires restriction.
- Strong laws need to limit and eventually eliminate the use of fossil fuels.

The Loss of Biodiversity

- The life of humanity depends on fifty thousand wild species.
- One million species of plants and animals face extinction.

This has far-reaching consequences, including endangering economies, food security and livelihoods.



The Loss of Biodiversity

Five major reasons for the loss of biodiversity

- (1) Changes in land and sea use
- (2) Invasive alien species.
- (3) Direct exploitation of organisms
- (4) Climate change
- (5) Pollution

The Loss of Biodiversity

Five reasons for the loss of biodiversity

(1) Loss of habitat due to changes in land and sea use



The Loss of Biodiversity

Five major reasons for the loss of biodiversity

(2) Invasive alien species



Japanese Knotweed is spreading in Europe and N. America

Image: Jason Smalley Gap Photos



The giant cane toad is an invader in Australia

edelmar/Getty Images

The Loss of Biodiversity

Five major reasons for the loss of biodiversity

(2) Invasive alien species

New assessment report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES):

- The threats from invasive alien species are increasing in all regions of the Earth and are predicted to do so in the future.
- Invasive alien species cause dramatic and, in some cases, irreversible changes to biodiversity and ecosystems.
- The economy, food security, water security and human health are profoundly and negatively affected by invasive alien species.

The Loss of Biodiversity

Five major reasons for the loss of biodiversity

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The Loss of Biodiversity

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The Loss of Biodiversity

Five major reasons for the loss of biodiversity

- (1) Changes in land and sea use
- (2) Invasive alien species
- (3) Direct exploitation of organisms

Take heed .. that ye hunt not to excess. Tread ye the path of justice and equity in all things.

Baha'u'llah, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas

The Loss of Biodiversity

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- (5) Pollution

The Value of Biodiversity

- Humanity depends on the rich diversity of plants and animals.
- Each created being has intrinsic value as God's creation.



Justice demands the restriction of freedom

- To prevent excessive exploitation of natural resources
 - Indigenous people and local people are most affected by the loss of their rich environment.



Justice demands the restriction of freedom

- To prevent excessive exploitation of natural resources
- To keep pollution to the minimum - poor people and minorities suffer the worst from industrial pollution



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- Justice toward future generations requires very urgent action to prevent more pollution and the further destruction of the environment.

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Baha'u'llah

How can we stay within the limits of moderation and not exceed our liberty?

The importance of laws that restrict outer freedom

Need for strong laws and regulations:

The Law must reign, and not the individual; thus will the world become a place of beauty and true brotherhood will be realized. Having attained solidarity, men will have found truth.

'Abdu'l-Baha, Paris Talk

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‘Abdu’l-Baha, Paris Talk

- To keep greenhouse gas emissions in check
- To prevent deforestation, overfishing, and other unsustainable practices.
- To keep our water, air, and soil clean.
- Laws must protect the commons such as air, water, the oceans and forests - the resources that belong to all of humankind. They can protect them from individuals and companies that put their selfish interests before the well-being of other people and nature.

The importance of laws that restrict outer freedom

Laws are necessary

- To safeguard the right to life, the freedom to exist for all people,
- To safeguard the human right to a healthy environment
- To safeguard nature for other life forms
- To safeguard the planet for future generations.

Restriction of outer freedom is often not accepted

The opposition to the restriction of outer freedom by laws and regulations is a major cause of

- Efforts to prevent climate action

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- Efforts to prevent climate action
- Efforts to restrict guns

Restriction of outer freedom is often not accepted

The opposition to the restriction of outer freedom by laws and regulations is a major cause of

- Efforts to prevent climate action
- Efforts to restrict guns

The root of the problem is a false understanding of what freedom really means.

Spiritual Maturity Required for Laws to Work

*The Law must reign, and not the individual; thus will the world become a place of beauty and true brotherhood will be realized. **Having attained solidarity, men will have found truth.***

'Abdu'l-Baha

Outer Freedom

Freedom must be restricted

- If it infringes on the freedom of others
- If is harmful to the common good.

Freedom must be protected to

- Advocate for environmentally and socially responsible laws
- Speak out against environmentally destructive practices
- Uphold the rights of environmental and human rights defenders

Outer Freedom in Our Personal Life

We have the outer freedom to choose the way we live, how environmentally responsible our actions are.

However, this freedom is sometimes restricted by circumstances and social conditions.

Limits of Outer Freedom Enable Creativity of Inner Freedom

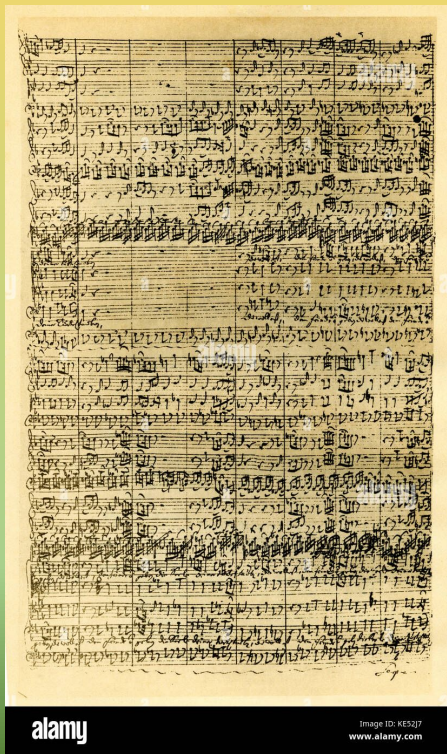
Climate change and other environmental problems force us to invent a new way of life, both individually and as a society. This opens a world of opportunity: We need to learn to be more creative.

Creativity can only unfold if there are limits, or you could say rules or laws. In other words, the limits to our outer freedom create the opportunity for the creativity of inner freedom to develop.

Limits of Outer Freedom Enable Creativity of Inner Freedom



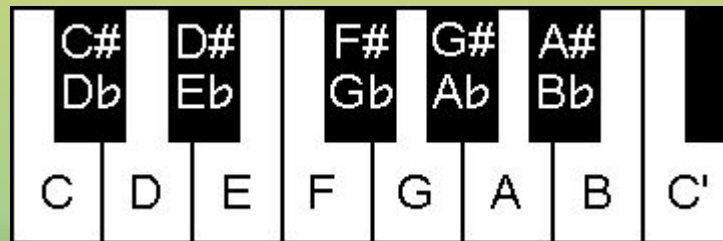
Limits of Outer Freedom Enable Creativity of Inner Freedom



Limits of Outer Freedom Enable Creativity of Inner Freedom



Twelve Tone Music



Limits of Outer Freedom Enable Creativity of Inner Freedom

If we try to live an environmentally responsible life, we can be more creative.

As a society:

- How can we create a clean energy infrastructure?
- How can we apply the science of sustainable agricultural methods in a community?
- How can we set up social structures that enable the sharing of tools, machines, and the volunteering of time?

Limits of Outer Freedom Enable Creativity of Inner Freedom

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As individuals:

- How can I live with what I already have instead of buying new things?
- How can I mend and repair things?
- How can I reuse things?
- How can we share things?

Limits of Outer Freedom Enable Creativity of Inner Freedom



Inner Freedom Regarding Environmental Sustainability

- Inner freedom does not have any limitations except our own ego that may stand in the way.
- We can use our inner freedom to choose to live an environmentally responsible life. This means making many moral choices throughout the day.

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- We can use our inner freedom to choose to live an environmentally responsible life. This means making many moral choices throughout the day.

Every choice a Bahá'í makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims.

Universal House of Justice 1 March 2017 – To the Bahá'ís of the World

Inner Freedom Regarding Environmental Sustainability

- Inner freedom does not have any limitations except our own ego that may stand in the way.
- We can use our inner freedom to choose to live an environmentally responsible life. This means making many moral choices throughout the day.
- We can free ourselves from the domination of materialism and consumerism.
- The inner freedom from the ego and being concerned with the well-being of society is the best protection from materialism and allows us to become more creative.

Inner Freedom to Choose Our Attitude toward Environmental Laws

Environmental laws may at times restrict our outer freedom or perhaps consist in paying a tax on carbon.

We can choose to accept and support such laws that are necessary to protect people and the environment, or we can choose to be angry and oppose them or to even disregard them.

Remember the words of 'Abdu'l-Baha about the importance of solidarity regarding just laws.

Summary

Outer Freedom

- Essential: Freedom from oppression, freedom of belief and expression
- Needs restriction: Moderation in civilization, laws that protect people and the environment from harmful actions (criminal behavior, pollution of all kinds)

Inner Freedom

- Freedom from the ego (lower self), spiritual development



O SON OF SPIRIT! Burst thy cage asunder, and even as the phoenix of love soar into the firmament of holiness. Renounce thyself and, filled with the spirit of mercy, abide in the realm of celestial sanctity.

Bahá'u'lláh / Part Two: From the Persian: Number 38

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- Service, Submission to the Will of God

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Inner Freedom

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- Service, Submission to the Will of God



All these conditions combined allow creativity to develop including the creativity to invent new sustainable ways of living on this planet.

There is a direct relationship between inner freedom, outer limits (moderation), and responsible actions. Our spiritual life, service, and social action are intricately connected and interdependent.

True Liberty

Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it. Then and only then will it attain unto true liberty.

Bahá'u'lláh / 7. Lawḥ-i-Dunyá

