

The Past as Gateway

By Michael Gray

"Instead of repeating our past patterns in greater and greater complexity and confusion, we could ground ourselves in a conscious appreciation of the past that allows us to learn and change. Then each new cycle, though repeating certain patterns from the past, could begin on a higher level of understanding."

-Knowledge of Freedom

In March 1992 I completed the six month Human Development Training at the Institute. I had gone into the program with some understanding of its goals: to gain a foundation for living more vigorously and happily in the present; to learn to be more mindful, sensitive, openhearted, and aware in this very moment. So it came as something of a surprise to discover the past as the door through which I could look at my life in new and liberating ways.

The Human Development Program has a carefully designed structure that deepens as it progresses. The first month offers methods for relaxation and makes it possible to loosen the body tensions and mental restlessness that everyone seems to bring into the retreat. The second month taps the nourishing quality of sense experience.

As the second month unfolded, I found that my experience became more vivid and more whole-as if some kind of inherent knowability permeated everything. At the same time, however, I began to be aware of how unable I have been to appreciate my own past experience, and of how this has hindered me from approaching the future with real confidence. The starting point was working with some of the exercises from Tarthang Tulku's *Knowledge of Freedom*. I discovered that I could explore my personal past in new and refreshing ways, revealing a far more interesting life than the one I had been accustomed to seeing.

In the third month of the program, which emphasizes an examination of the self-image, an understanding emerged that let me make sense of some of my self-imposed limitations. As we cultivated greater awareness in the fourth month of the program, I had the sense of something stirring within, as though dormant capacities were coming to life.

After a break for Christmas, the program shifted into its second phase, known as the Integration Program. Here questioning old patterns and looking freshly at different aspects of the past became a central part of each day. As we examined the past in a variety of unusual ways, I was able to expand the insights of the previous four months and take them in unexpected directions.

One exercise during the Integration Program involved reviewing the first twenty-three years of our life in nine stages. Looking closely at my very early life, I was astonished at what I could see. There were key events in the first two years of my existence that opened themselves in a whole new way, such as the time I almost drowned. It began to make sense that I could 'remember' these early events and honor their importance for me and for my family.

In another exercise, we examined our lives in terms of transitions. Again I was amazed: There were many such times of transition that I had never before appreciated. A picture began to emerge of an eventful early life, and for the first time the depth and breadth of a human life as we all live it came into focus.

The handful of overused and uninteresting images that I had learned to accept as "my past" now dissolved, and I entered a rich new world. I felt as if I was reclaiming a part of myself on which I had previously turned my back. It was not so much that forgotten memories began to flood in, but more that I started to feel friendly toward the person I had been—more interested in looking back and seeing why I had acted as I had and made the choices I did, more willing to appreciate the capacity for growth that I had expressed over the years.

By now a central theme had emerged. I saw that throughout much of my life I have not allowed myself to dream, and I began to see how necessary dreams are for life. That realization motivated me to work on myself. I began to see that I might have another sense of self that is far more open and free, confident and appreciative. As I became less concerned with frozen postures, I found myself able to explore each moment in a fresh and vital way.

I saw some painful things during this process. There was my tendency to formulate objections that cut off potential long before any vision could flower into an intention. I learned to catch an inner voice in the act of undermining confidence, telling me what I could and could not do. I found that I could penetrate the message of this voice that it had my best interests in mind, and could experience directly how the voice came from a fear of failure, of criticism, of committing myself to effort.

Less dependent on these old views, I saw that our lives seem framed by a sense of time. We feel confident or limited based on who we think we have been in the past. The person whose energy and heart must be awakened is in some sense the same person who has lived our lives. A sense of past failures can lead us into a vicious circle, feeding a lack of confidence that makes us focus on what corroborated a negative self-image. When this is my experience, 'I know' that the possibility for something truly wonderful to happen in my life is not for me.

I have learned that this closed circle can also become a two-sided opportunity. If we can learn to appreciate what we have been in the past, we will feel more grounded in the present, and this grounding will let us see the past with friendlier eyes.

In *Knowledge of Freedom*, Tarthang Tulku writes, "If we are disillusioned with the roles society offers us, . . . we can, instead, find roles that are uniquely our own and build within ourselves a new understanding of what it means to be a successful human being." For me, this is an invitation to rediscover and remake my past—to develop my own unique way of participating fully in my life. I can still hear the voices that tell me I will always need an external structure to define who I am and label success and failure. But now there is a way to challenge these voices of discouragement and limitation. I have begun to listen to my dreams again. It is like discovering a family that I thought I had lost.

Michael Gray is a writer and computer programmer who lives in Albuquerque.