

Free to Do the Right Thing

January 4, 2006

We all want to be free, but we have some strange ideas of what it means to be free. A lot of us think that freedom means being able to do whatever we want. But if you look at your life, you realize that sometimes doing what you want to do has good results and sometimes it has bad results. Sometimes it leads to happiness, sometimes it leads to pain. So if you really think about it, you realize that freedom means being able to do what leads to happiness, what leads to well-being. And you notice that sometimes the what leads to well-being is what you want to do, and other times it's not what you want to do. Doing things that you like that lead to well-being: Those are easy. The hard actions are the ones that you don't want to do but will lead to well-being. It's in that area where your wants are the major restriction on your freedom. You've got to look at where those wants come from, where those desires come from.

From the Buddha's point of view, they come from ignorance. But ignorance doesn't mean just not knowing, it means knowledge that gets in the way, knowledge that's in the wrong terms. We carry a lot of that kind of knowledge around with us, things that may be true but are not beneficial, or may be true and beneficial at sometimes, but not really right for other times.

It's like the Buddha's comments on speech. He said there are things you can say that are true and beneficial, but you also have to be sensitive to what's the right time to speak those things. The same principle applies to your thoughts. We carry a lot of useful truths around with us, but one of the major skills in meditation is learning when and how to put them aside. They come down to two types of things. The first includes the narratives of our lives. You realize that when you look at the way you tell the story of your life to yourself, it's not one narrative. You have lots of different narratives, and sometimes they get all tangled up.

The same with views about the world: We have lots of different views about the world that are jumbled up in our minds. It's hard to tell which view is going to come out and impose itself on you at any particular time. So one of the skills in meditation is learning how to put all those things aside and to look only for what's true and beneficial and right for right now.

When you're doing concentration practice, there are only a few things that really right for right now. Those are the thoughts to keep you focused on the breath, keep you focused on the present moment. As for other thoughts, no matter how true they may be, no matter how beneficial they maybe in other times,

you've got to learn to put them aside. Thoughts about what you did today, thoughts about what you're going to do later today, what you're going to do tomorrow: Those are narratives that, for the moment, you don't want to get involved in. They limit your freedom to do what's the right thing to do right now, which is to stay focused on the present moment, to keep watch over the movements of your mind.

When you look at the Buddha's teachings, you notice that he's not the sort of person who tells any grand narratives about who created the world with what purpose. The large narratives usually come down to the power of karma. And where is karma being done? Right here, right now. So the purpose of those narratives is to focus you right here.

The same with large metaphysical theories: There are very few in Buddhism. The important ones do have to do with karma, your actions. And the Buddha is very clear in his teachings on action. What you're experiencing right now is the results of past actions combined with your present actions and their results. You can't do anything about past actions, but this explanation really focuses you on what you're doing right now.

So those are the kind of narratives and worldviews that really are helpful, really are beneficial, and are right for right now. They keep you focused here. Once they've got you focused here, then you can drop them, because the creation of the present moment is partly already done from the past, but the finishing touches are going on right now: The movements of your mind—these little movements going here, going there—create your experience of the world. They seem so minor, so inconsequential, and yet they have huge consequences, both for whether your experience of the present moment is going to be pleasant or painful, and for the pleasure and pain you're going to experience in the future. If you're weighing yourself down with pain right now, it's also likely that you're going to weigh other people down with pain, too.

So whatever thinking would be truthful and beneficial and right for right now is meant to keep you focused right here. Anything else that pulls you away from right here is not right for right now. No matter how true or beneficial it may be at other times, it's not right for here, right now. One of the major skills in meditation is learning how to put all that other stuff aside, to say, "No, we're not going there. We're not going to give reality to those constructs."

Because that's what they are: They're constructs. They're fabrications. They demand so much of our attention because there are times when they're useful fabrications but they're not useful right now. You have to develop a very strong sense of that.

See the importance of the present moment. See the importance of what you're doing right now, and learn to get sensitive to what's skillful and what's not skillful right now, what kind of breathing is good right now, what way of focusing on the breath is good right now, what's getting good results. Think about that. Focus on that. The more you can do that, the more freedom you can exercise in the present moment. Don't let those other thoughts come in and limit your freedom to do what's going to give good results. This is the only place where you have genuine freedom: in your choice of what to do in the present moment.

One of the skills you want to develop as a meditator is to maximize the range of that freedom. Any thought that comes in and restricts that freedom, that makes you want to think about other things, to worry about other things, or limit the range of what you can do right now, just let that go. As soon as any kind of thought like that comes up, just put it aside, put it aside, put it aside. Don't give it more reality than it deserves. Every thought as a tool. If you're sawing some wood right now, you don't want to clutter your hands with screwdrivers, levels, shovels, or pickaxes. Even though those tools may be useful at other times, they're not what you want right now. You're trying to saw a piece of wood, so the only tool you need in your head right now is the saw. Then you stay focused on the point where the saw meets the wood.

Limiting your attention to the point that's really important, even though it seems like a limitation, is actually a way of expanding your freedom, your freedom to do what's going to give good results. And when you come right down to it, that's the only freedom that matters.

So stay focused right here, because right here is where things are being created, things are being fabricated. Be very careful about the movements of your mind. And be very careful about which tools you're picking up. There's only one tool that's useful right now. So focus all your attention on using that tool in the best way possible, because that's where freedom lies.