The Perfection of Freedom

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Life is full of limitations. We live in a very imperfect world. It starts with this fact of eating, that question in the novice’s catechism, “What is one, all beings subsist on food?” Right there is a really dismaying fact. Life depends on eating. It’s not simply a matter of sipping the dew off the grass. The fact that we eat involves a lot of suffering, and that’s just to keep going. And the feeding is not just physical. There’s a lot of emotional and mental feeding going on as well. Interbeing is intereating. On top of that, there are the limitations that each of us suffers in terms of our knowledge, our wealth, our energy, our health, our lifespan. The world seems to be closing in all the time. When you have a chance to step back a little bit and not be totally concerned with your own suffering, you begin to see other people’s sufferings as well. And it can be overwhelming. There’s so much suffering in the world. We have only so much energy, only so much time. So what are you going to do in this imperfect world? They talk about developing perfections as one way of conceiving the path. Perfection, though, is a really imprecise word for that. It probably weren’t part of me. It means “what’s foremost.” In other words, what’s of foremost importance in your life. None of these things can be totally perfected. Generosity. You cannot be perfectly generous, because there are constraints on generosity. Virtue. You can’t be perfectly virtuous, even if you’re held by the five precepts. The five precepts only cover so much. You can’t be totally sure that you’re not killing anything at all, that you’re not taking anything. That your words are absolutely true all the time. You do your best, and that’s what the precepts are for, to keep working at your best as part of training the mind. But even there, in these different perfections, there are compromises. There’s one area, though, where there is a possibility of perfection, and that’s perfect freedom. That’s what nibbana is all about. The word nibbana means “unbinding,” like you’re loosening up all the constraints on the mind, totally unbound by space or time or any conditions at all. That’s the only possibility of freedom at all, the only possibility of perfection at all. Remember this freedom we have in the present moment, which is what enables us to choose whether we want to head in that direction or head in other directions. This is what we try to maximize as we meditate, to develop the qualities of mind that explore and expand the possibility of freedom of choice. That’s what the freedom is, that we can tap into at any time. Most people don’t. They have the potential for choice, but they don’t make the most of it. They develop a few skills and then stop right there. They lead their lives with whatever limited range of skills they have. They have a certain series of narratives. This is where the old idea of games people play comes from. There are certain narratives that people keep living out over and over and over in their lives, both in the worlds they create in the mind and in the interactions they have with other people. You imagine a certain world, and then all of a sudden there’s a particular role that you play in that world. We very rarely change roles or expand our abilities. We need to take on new roles. What this means is that we don’t learn new skills. Why is it important to do this? Because the more skills you learn, one, the more skillfully you can deal with the situations of life, but secondly, the more you begin to explore that potential for freedom here in the present moment. You give yourself more choices. As you develop skills, particularly the skills of meditation, you develop those qualities of mind that enable you to step back and look at what really needs to be done, to question your knee-jerk reactions, to ask yourself, “Is there another way of dealing with these issues, whatever the issues may be?” Mindfulness helps here as it keeps in mind the range of skills you’ve developed. And alertness, which allows you to see things in the present moment that you might not have seen if you simply kept your old blinders on. Concentration keeps you focused here. Not only that, but given the fact that the mind is always feeding, it gives you something good to feed on, a sense of well-being that comes from within. It doesn’t have to depend on people outside or anything outside. It doesn’t take anything away from anyone. When the mind is well-fed, it’s more willing to look at alternatives, to look at its old ways of doing things and seeing, “Well, maybe there’s a different way. Maybe that old way of thinking, that old way of reacting, is not really in my best interest or in the best interest of the people around me. Maybe it’s time to think of something different.” When the mind is well-fed, it sees a lot of its old habits. It sees them as unnecessary, not only unnecessary but also harmful, stressful, causing suffering. Then there’s discernment, which allows you to see distinctions. The mind has a tendency to clomb a lot of things together and not really look very carefully. It sees that old world again, so you know the role for that old world and you take on that old role, even though it may not be that same old world. You have the ability to see what’s going on, just simply here being with the body. The discernment enables you to see. When you have a sensation, what is the physical side of the sensation? In other words, the solidity, liquidity, warmth, the energy. What is the feeling side, the feeling of pleasure or pain? Those are two very different things. When you can see the distinction between them, you begin to see how fleeting pleasure and pain are. They come and go, come and go, come and go. Yet we live our lives trying to feed off those pleasures. We end up feeding on a lot of pain. When you develop these qualities—mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment—they put you in a position where you begin to see what’s actually going on and what the alternatives are to how you’re going to react, where you can make a difference and where you can’t. There’s an opening to more freedom. This possibility of freedom is something that can be perfected, but it’s something that each of us has to do for him or herself alone, because it’s a question of skill. No one can make you more skillful than you are. They can point out certain ideas or certain possibilities, help to expand your sense of what’s possible. I know in my own experience with the Jon Fu, that was a lot of what it was all about. He was pointing out things that I had never thought as possible at all, beginning with simple things like, “What is going on in your body? Is there energy movement? How is this related to the breath?” I’d never thought of that possibility. I learned to explore it. Possibilities in terms of the amount of effort you can put into the practice, the amount of consistency you can put into the practice. Possibilities in terms of looking at the consequences of your actions. Not only thinking of different ways of responding to what you see around you, but also new ways of seeing what’s around you. This is what the practice can do for us. It expands our awareness of the potential freedom we have here in the present moment to make skillful choices. This is the most important aspect of the Buddhist teachings, this possibility for skillfulness. As he said, if it weren’t possible for people to develop skill in their thoughts, words, and deeds, he wouldn’t teach. But it is possible. That means we do have a certain amount of free will, a certain amount in the sense that we could expand it. For most of us, we don’t take advantage of the possibility, so it just stays limited, and we act on automatic pilot. We follow our old, habitual ways, like a wind-up doll. But we’re not wind-up dolls. We have the ability to sense suffering, our own suffering, the suffering of people around us. We have the ability to see connections, interactions, between what we do and the things we experience. And that knowledge can teach us. We can learn from that. And the meditation is a process of learning how to expand on that possibility, to make the most of it, to perfect this potential for freedom. That’s the one perfection that really can get perfect. It’s possible to touch perfect freedom. It’s not constrained by anything at all. And it’s through expanding our sense of what it means to be aware of the present moment, to see how much we do shape the present moment through our intentions. So we keep digging down, digging down in this spot, the intentions of the mind. Because they’re the aspect of the mind that’s closest to freedom. What this means on an everyday level is that whatever the situation that presents itself to you as a result of your past actions or whatever, you have the choice to respond in a skillful or unskillful way. The more you take advantage of that possibility, the greater your freedom is going to be. So you don’t have to keep responding like a doll. You don’t have to keep going the old ways. There are alternatives. But it’s important to see how much you are shaping the present moment. So when we meditate, we’re focusing on an intention, the intention to stay with the breath. And as you master the ability to stick with that one intention, you’re going to learn an awful lot about the intention, as you’re going to learn an awful lot about the breath. But the knowledge about intention is going to be more important, because it’s in that direction that perfect freedom lies.

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