Independence Day

July 4, 2008

Today is Independence Day, the day we celebrate our freedoms, such as they are. And it’s appropriate that we’re meditating, because, as the Buddha pointed out, true freedom has to come from within. If you’re still a slave to your defilements, then no matter how free you may be outside, you’re still a slave. So we meditate to develop qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, to free ourselves from these inner masters, to free ourselves from our old habits. And it’s something that can be done, as the Buddha said. It is possible to develop skillful qualities. If it weren’t possible, he wouldn’t tell people to do it. It is possible to abandon unskillful ones. If it weren’t possible, he wouldn’t have taught them. So we do have the freedom to change our ways. All too often you read the teaching on karma as a deterministic teaching, that what you’re going to experience is already set in stone by what you did in the past. But that’s not what the Buddha taught. He actually actively attacked that view. You look at his teachings on causality and you see why. What you experience right now is not simply the result of past actions. You’re also experiencing your present actions, i.e., your present choices. And the results of your present choices. Because what you experience has been chosen from the various possibilities that your past karma presents at any particular moment. The images of the canon are of a field. You’ve got a field with all kinds of seeds, some of which are ready to sprout, some of which are going to be dormant for a while. And among the ones that are ready to sprout, you water some, and they grow. Your present karma here is the water. All too often, though, the water is the water of craving and clinging. And so on the path, what you’re trying to do is learn how to crave and cling in a skillful way. After all, desire is part of the path. And you learn to cling to certain views while you’re on the path. The right view, the correct understanding of karma, the correct understanding of how suffering happens, why it happens, and what you can do to put an end to it. You’ve got to hold on to that view. There’s clinging to habits and practices, i.e., right speech, right livelihood, right action, and the practice of right concentration, which involves right resolve. And even clinging to a sense of self, the self that is confident that you’re reliable, you can depend on yourself to do these things, and you’re confident that you’ve got the capability to do it. So these are skillful forms of clinging that we use to develop into the path. We have the freedom to choose which seeds we’re going to water and how we water them. Doctors and psychiatrists have shown that the brain doesn’t simply receive all input from the senses equally. It has its ways of blocking out certain input and magnifying others, and sometimes even creating the illusion that there are certain messages coming in from the nerves, which means that this filtering process in the brain is going on all the time. For most of us, it’s subconscious. It’s on automatic pilot, which means we tend to fall into our old habits. But the Buddha’s teachings on mindfulness show that we don’t have to do that. We have the potential for freedom in the present moment. This is where free will can operate. Choosing what to focus on, what not to focus on, choosing how to interpret it, this requires mindfulness and alertness. The commentary on karma-intent talks about karma-intent in terms of a cycle. There’s the intention, and then there’s the result of the intention, and then there’s a defilement that responds to that result and causes new intentions. You can’t break the connection between the action and the result. But you can’t break the connection between the result and the defilement that tends to respond to it. So instead of responding in a defiled way, with greed, anger, and delusion, we can choose to respond in a skillful way. Or even if a certain defilement does arise, we can check it so that it doesn’t lead to action. It’s another way of breaking the cycle. So we have this potential for freedom. The more mindful and alert we are, the more we expand the range of what’s consciously going on in the present moment. So we can actually see these decisions as they’re being made. We can encourage skillful responses and abandon unskillful ones. So this is the path to freedom, this simple practice of being mindful of the breath, being alert to the breath, and being alert to the mind. Learning to expand our range of knowing what’s going on in the present moment, we can expand our awareness. And as our awareness expands, we also gain more and more control. That our habitual ways of speaking, our habitual ways of acting, don’t just get automatically kicked into action. We can stop, look, and see. What are we doing right now that’s causing suffering? In what ways are our actions unskillful? In what ways are our words unskillful? In what ways are our thoughts unskillful? It’s through mindfulness and alertness that you can see cause and effect happening right now. And once you see that something is unskillful, then you can learn to use your discernment to figure out ways of avoiding it. Because it’s not enough to see that it’s unskillful, you also have to see that it’s avoidable. That’s when you can drop it. So many things we do that are unskillful, we say, “Well, there’s no choice. We’ve just got to keep doing it this way. This is the only way you can do it.” It’s like a person carrying around a load on his shoulders. He doesn’t know that he can put it down, so he’s bent over and he suffers. And he knows that he’s bent over and he knows that he suffers, but he can’t conceive of putting the burden down, so he just accepts it as part of the way things have to be. If the Buddha had been able to take people’s loads off their shoulders, he would have done that. But it’s something each of us has to do for him or herself. You have to see that your way of speaking, your way of thinking, your way of acting is unskillful, no matter how much you’re accustomed to doing it, saying, “Well, this is my way.” You’ve got to keep questioning your way. Does it have to be that way? Can it be another way? For many of us, this enters into unfamiliar territory. But you just have to keep reminding yourself that your familiar territory is where you’re suffering. Maybe unfamiliar territory opens a new way out of suffering. Freedom can be a little scary sometimes, which is why we keep running back to our old ways and running away from freedom. But it takes an act of confidence in the Buddha, an act of confidence in the Dhamma and the Sangha, to be willing to try a different way of doing things, a different way of saying things, a different way of speaking, to explore the alternatives. That’s what freedom is all about, to realize you do have alternatives and you’re free to choose the most skillful one, the one that leads to two halves. That’s what freedom is all about. It allows us to find true happiness. So we have this potential for free will. We have the potential for freedom. And the meditation is what allows us to explore that potential, to actualize it. It’s there all the time. But for most of us, it’s simply there as a potential and not as an actuality. It’s by developing our powers of mindfulness and alertness that the potential does become actual and the freedom becomes real.

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