NR Do You Want to Be Free

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Do you really want to be free? Free from all the limitations of the world, all the conditions it places on you? Free from suffering, free from stress? You’d think that everyone’s answer would be, “Of course.” But most of us don’t believe that such freedom is possible. We’re afraid of it. It sounds very unfamiliar. But this is the challenge that Buddha’s life places in front of us. It says it is possible to be free. You can be free through your own actions. And you do it by learning to take responsibility for your actions. That principle of action and your responsibility, that’s your way out. Of course, we look at the way and it sounds pretty daunting. Precepts, concentration, working on developing the wisdom and discernment, that goes way beyond ordinary wisdom and discernment. It sounds like it’s too much, more than we can handle. But how about the suffering in life? Isn’t that too much? Isn’t that more than we can handle? There’s a passage where the Buddha says that practice starts with conviction. And where does conviction come from? It comes from the sense that we’ve had enough suffering in life. And as you look ahead, what do you see? Like that chant just now, “We’re subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death.” Another way of translating that would be, “Haven’t gone beyond aging, haven’t gone beyond illness, haven’t gone beyond death. These things are waiting for us in the future.” And are you ready for them? Particularly with death, you have no idea how soon it’s going to come. Illness can come at any time. Aging seems to be more spaced out. But even then, it’s a surprise. It creeps up on you. The body doesn’t ask your permission to grow old. It doesn’t warn you ahead of time that this or that joint or this or that muscle is going to wear out. It just suddenly happens, something you’ve been depending on for such a long time, and all of a sudden you can’t depend on it anymore. And I can only guarantee you that we’re not going to suffer from these things when they give the mind a really good solid foundation and lock it inside. That’s what we work on as we meditate. So when we see this suffering, we get the conviction that this could work. But still we’re not sure. So the Buddha advises that we find someone to teach us the way, someone who embodies the way, and show us that it is possible. Because you look at the Buddha himself, it’s not like he started out perfect. Even he had his failings and his foibles. He was addicted to sensual pleasures. And yet he was able to find a way out. And we think about the Buddha, 2,500 years ago, and it often seems hard to connect him. So we look at the stories of the Ajats, more recent examples, not just monks and nuns, but laypeople who’ve reached the stream. They’ve practiced to the point where they can find the doubtless inside. And so we look for people like this, listen to their teachings, think them over, until we decide that, yes, it makes sense. Based on that, you give rise to the desire to find that peace within yourself. And from desire, the Buddha says, comes willingness, a willingness to give. You give it a try, to put aside some of the pleasures you’re used to, whichever ones the past says get in the way, and focus on developing other pleasures in their place. Like there is a pleasure that comes from being generous. Because the mind that’s able to be generous is the mind that has more than enough. Because some people, they’re millionaires, billionaires. And you think they’ve reached the point where they have enough, but no, then they have to get into competition with other millionaires and billionaires and see who’s got more money. There’s no end to that. They’re poor. Wealthy people are the ones who have enough to share, regardless of how much, in terms of material, the measures that would be. So by being generous, you make yourself a wealthy person. And then there’s the gift of the precepts. You decide that you’re not going to harm anybody. You want a happiness that lasts. And no happiness that’s built on harming others is going to last. Because they want happiness too, and they’re not going to put up with being harmed. And you, yourself, start feeling uneasy. You decide, as I said in the beginning, the principle that you’re not going to kill, steal, cheat on other people. You’re not going to lie, you’re not going to take intoxicants, because you know these things are harmful. And whatever pleasure they give is a mixed pleasure. It’s not pure. It’s mixed with a lot of pain and suffering. Then when you’re able to stick with those precepts, there’s a sense of self-esteem. And then to strengthen that esteem, you work on meditation. Learning how to bring your mind under control, in a way that’s pleasurable. Because if the control is harsh and unpleasant, you’re not going to stick with it. As the Buddha said, even when you see the drawbacks of some pleasures, but you don’t have the pleasure to take their place, a pleasure that’s deeper and more lasting, you’re not going to be able to give them up. Normal, everyday pleasures are like addictions. We keep coming back, coming back, coming back. Even though we know they have their drawbacks. Like that story of a man who was eating a bushel full of peppers, crying, because the peppers were so hot. And they asked him, “Why are you eating those peppers?” He says, “I’m looking for the sweet one.” That’s the way we are with most of our pleasures. They haven’t really worked that well in the past, and yet we keep going back to them. It’s because we can’t imagine anything better. We can’t imagine that we could accomplish anything better. Here again, it’s good to reflect on the Buddha’s life. He said he gained his awakening not because he had special qualities that nobody else could have. It was in his mind that we all have in our minds the potential of being heedful, ardent, really giving yourself to something you know is good, being resolute. These are things we can all do. And they’re made a lot easier when you find a good object to focus on, a good home for the mind. This is why we focus on the breath, because the breath can feel all kinds of different ways. It can feel harsh. It can feel comfortable. It can feel heavy. It can feel light. If it can feel energizing, it can feel depleting. It can feel relaxing. It can feel tense. We can adjust it in all kinds of ways. It’s one of the few bodily functions that we can actually have some control over. So take advantage of that fact. Try exploring your breath. What kind of breathing feels really good right now? Which part of the body would really benefit from good breath energy? How do you know it’s going to benefit? Because it feels good. It’s not like eating spinach. When we were little kids, we hated spinach, but we were told it was good. So we put up with the taste. But the breath, when you make it comfortable, you don’t have to put up with anything. It feels good deep down inside. So explore and see what kind of breathing does feel good deep down inside. What’s your taste in breathing? You can make yourself a connoisseur. In the beginning, we’re not feeling it. We’re not familiar with it too much. But it’s like learning any kind of food, say like cheese or chocolate. You find a cheese that you like and you stick with it. Then you start experimenting with other cheeses. And you develop your palate. You become more discerning. You get more joy out of cheese. If you don’t explore cheese, all you know is Alvida. That’s it. That’s all cheese has to offer. And it’s the same with the breath. If you don’t explore it, it’s just in and out, and that’s it. Nothing much. But start exploring to see how the breathing feels in different parts of the body. Just make a survey. You can start at the navel, go up the front of the body, through the head, down the back, out the legs. And start at the back of the neck, go down the shoulders and out the arms. Then start at the navel again. Up over the head, down the back, out the legs. Just again and again and again. Get familiar with how the breathing process feels in your body. And see what kind of breathing would feel good for each part of the body as you go through it. As you do this, you become sensitive to lots of different aspects of the breathing, lots of potentials in the breathing that you wouldn’t have realized otherwise. And here it is, free. It’s right here, right now. The possibility of giving rest, your sense of real well-being. No matter how tired you are or where there may be aches and pains in the body, you can breathe around them, breathe through them. Think of the breath penetrating any patterns of tension anywhere in the body. Just dissolving them away. And as you do this, you get a greater sense of feeling at home in the present moment. And when you’re more at home here, you can look at the other possibilities you might want to look at for pleasure. Your old ways of looking for pleasure. And you realize they’re not as good as this. Which leads to the next question. Why would you want to continue following them? Especially when you begin to see that it is an either/or situation. In other words, the more you pursue some pleasures, the harder it is to meditate. There’s a story in the canon of a prince who’s out walking one day for exercise, and he comes across a namas in a hut in the forest. So he asks the namas, “I understand that the monists can get their minds concentrated but can you explain to me how this is done?” And the namas, probably knowing the prince, says, “You wouldn’t understand.” The prince says, “Come on, I just might.” So the namas says, “Okay, I’ll explain it to you, but if you disagree with me, don’t hassle me, okay?” So the prince says, “Okay.” So the namas explains how the monks get their minds concentrated. And the prince says, “It’s impossible. Nobody could ever get their minds concentrated like that.” He walks off. So the namas goes to report the conversation to the Buddha, and the Buddha says, “What did you expect? That prince is on fire with sensual fever, thirsting for sensual passions, totally overwhelmed by sensual desires. How is a person like that ever going to understand the idea of a quiet, peaceful mind? There are some pleasures in life that, when you pursue them, really make it difficult for the mind to settle down. It’s an either/or affair. So you look at their allure, exactly why would you want to follow those pleasures, but then you can look at their drawbacks. Now that you have a greater sense of well-being inside, you can take a more objective look at your old pleasures. And you’re in a better position to abandon them. You don’t have to pursue them anymore, because you’ve got something better. This is where you get your first taste of how freedom is possible, things that you were a slave to for many, many years. And you build up a whole ideology around it,”Well, I’m just totally shaped by my conditions, shaped by the conditions in my body, shaped by the conditions in society.” That is your excuse for not trying for anything better. But now you realize something better is possible. You can do it. And it is better. That helps open your mind to the possibility that maybe other forms of freedom are possible, too. Maybe the Buddha’s right. Of course, you’re never going to know unless you give it a try. Give his teachings a try, until you develop that sense of conviction that there must be a way out, and your desire that you really do want to find that way out, and then your willingness to actually do it. These are some of the steps in how the path to freedom actually works. So allow yourself to imagine, “Yes, it is possible.” “Yes, I can do it.” That conviction is how you get started.

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