Freedom of Choice

January 2, 2010

It’s interesting to note that when the Buddha talks about the limitations in human life, he focuses on the life of kings. We tend to think that kings have the most freedom. In some countries, they lie above the law and do whatever they want. That’s precisely why the Buddha focuses on the limitations of human life, the limitations in the life of kings. That chant we heard just now, “The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. It’s insatiable, insufficient. It’s a slave to craving.” Those topics are brought up in a conversation with a king. The king doesn’t understand these principles, and so he asks the monk, Rattabala, what these statements mean. Rattabala draws examples from the king’s own life. When the king was young, he felt that he had the strength of two men. Now he’s old, and sometimes he means to put his foot in one place and ends up putting it in another. The world is swept away. When he’s sick, even though he’s a king, he can’t tell other people to bear the pain of his illness or share it out so that he feels less. The world offers no shelter. And even though he has all the wealth of a king, with storerooms filled with gold and silver, he can’t carry it on with him when he goes on to the next life. And even then, he’s not satisfied with what he’s already got. He wants to get more, not of a better kind, just more of the same kind of stuff, even though he’s going to have to leave it behind. He’s a slave to his craving. So the principles that apply to a king apply even more so to the rest of us. Yet the Buddha still insists that we do have our freedoms. It’s the freedom of choice of what we’re going to do. In some situations, that freedom is very limited. But you can choose to do the harmless thing. You can choose to do whatever is most skillful in that particular situation. It’s simply that in some situations, the skillful choice is a lot harder than in others. But the principle applies across the board, even in warfare. You can decide to live the way everybody else does. Society turns into what the Buddha would call a “sword interval,” where people are just hunting one another down, and people grab what they can, and all the precepts get broken. Then you can decide, well, you’re going to follow everybody else and live that way. You’re going to maintain your honor, which at times means sacrificing your life. But which is more valuable? The Buddha would say, “Your honor.” He talks about the monks observing the precepts and holding the precepts even at the cost of life. That’s the kind of principle he’s maintaining, or the kind of standard he’s maintaining. So regardless of what limitations we find in our lives, we should focus on where the freedom lies and make the most of that. Whether it’s easy or hard is not the issue. The issue is to remind yourself that you do have the choice. It’s in no way an act of kindness to think that you don’t have the choice, or that other people don’t have choices. Sometimes we hear people’s behavior being excused by saying, “Well, they couldn’t help themselves,” or, “Their situation was bad, so they had to end up the way they did.” Think about the forest of Jhansi. Most of them came from very, very poor circumstances. John Fu once said, “If you hadn’t become a monk, you probably would have become a petty criminal.” But he didn’t. He made that choice. When you think about the forest tradition, the odds were stacked against them. Bangkok was coming out at that time with its own version of what the Buddha taught, designed to help with a new nation-state, to make sure the French and the English didn’t take over Thailand. It was going to require that the monks leave their wandering and settle down to be schoolteachers. And they had it on good authority. They said that the way to Nirvana was closed and people weren’t even able to attain jhana anymore, so let’s give up trying and come and be our schoolteachers. You’d think people at the bottom of the social ladder, the bottom of the pyramid, would go along or have no choice but to go along. But they did have their choices. In this case, the choice meant going out in the forest, going out in the wilderness, living a life of hardship. Maintaining the honor of the mind, maintaining the honor of their choices, maximizing what freedom they did have to do the skillful thing, to say the skillful thing, to develop the mind in skillful ways. That’s a freedom that we all have, simply that our past choices sometimes place limitations on what range of choices are available, which is one of the good reasons to try to keep doing the skillful thing, to keep choosing the skillful thing. And when it’s difficult to choose the skillful thing, it’s good to have developed strengths of mind, to develop good qualities of mind. This is why we meditate. We’re stocking the mind with good qualities. We’re investing our time in developing good qualities. The word “investment” may sound crass, in a context like this, but the Buddha himself used a similar vocabulary. He talked about the treasures of the mind, the treasure of conviction. Belief not only that there is a way out of suffering, but the Buddha was able to gain awakening through his own efforts, and he did it in a way that shows that other people can do that, too. That conviction is one of your major treasures, because it reminds you of the importance of your actions. Even though life may be short, the world is swept away. It does not endure all those other truths about the world. Still, we can make a difference through our actions, develop our perfections, develop the qualities and strengths of the mind that we need, and at the same time, benefit ourselves and other people, too. It’s important to hold to that conviction. Based on that is the principle of abstaining from unskillful behavior. This is where the next three treasures come in. There’s virtue, which the Buddha defines primarily in terms of the things that you avoid. You avoid killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants. And you develop the qualities of mind that are needed to keep that principle of abstinence strong—a sense of shame and a sense of compunction. Modern psychology has had a lot of negative things to say about shame, but there is such a thing as healthy shame—the shame that comes with your sense of self-esteem and thinking of doing things that would be sordid or harmful to other people, harmful to yourself. You would feel ashamed to do that because you have a high self-regard. That kind of shame is healthy—the shame when you think that you’re a horrible person incapable of doing anything. That’s unhealthy shame. The Buddha does not encourage that. He encourages the healthy kind of shame. Compunction is when you think about the results of your actions in your life. You simply would not want to harm yourself or other beings. You wouldn’t want to do something that would lead to more limitations in the future, more difficulties in the future. It’s the opposite of apathy. Why should I care about someone in the future life if that person is not me? If I’m not me, then? Well, when you’re in your future life, you feel like me. You feel like you right now, right? Would you have guessed in your past lifetime that you would be the person you are now? But you still feel like you. In your past lifetime, whoever, whatever you were, you felt like you. You looked at your hand, whether it was black or brown or white, or it wasn’t even a hand, and it felt like yours. And the same principle is going to apply in the next lifetime. So you do want to have some care for where you’re going to be. This is where a healthy sense of self is an important part of the path. The remaining treasures are more on the positive side, one gathering up knowledge of the Dharma and the Dharma. We’ve spent so much of our lives gathering up useless information. We need some protection against the weird attitudes that we’ve picked up, the weird assumptions that we’ve picked up, without even thinking about it. So it’s good to reflect on the Dharma. This is why we have the chants. This is why we have Dharma books, Dharma talks. It’s to present a different way of looking at the world, a different way of looking at your actions. A different way of understanding the potential that you have in your actions, and keeping yourself well-stocked with reminders that you want to act in a skillful way. Another treasure to develop in the mind is generosity, giving of material things, giving of your time, giving of your knowledge, giving of your forgiveness. These attitudes create a large sense of freedom in the mind. Because if you’re constantly worried about losing this or losing that, your mind gets more and more narrow. If you could take a picture of that kind of mind, even though the person may have lots and lots of material wealth, they’re very poor. They’re curled up and clutching a few things, which is a miserable state of mind to have. Whereas the state of mind you develop by being generous is much broader. It’s wider open. And it is an expression of freedom. When the Buddha was teaching about the freedom that comes through accepting his teaching on karma, he would start with the principle of generosity, that you have the choice of giving to whomever you want, giving whatever you have to whomever you want. He would not place any limitations on that. He said, “If one person tries to prevent another person from giving, to still a third person, that first person is creating a lot of demerit.” You don’t want to put any restrictions on anyone else’s generosity. There’s an interesting reading recently about this controversy that’s been flaring up in some parts of the Sangha. One side has been issuing statements that the other side should be starved. Don’t give to these people. Force them to see things our way by making them starve. And they tried to quote the Buddha as having encouraged that kind of thing. Well, the stories that are told in the Canon, the Buddha doesn’t encourage anybody to stop giving. Even when there’s a split in the Sangha and one side seems right and the other side seems wrong, the Buddha says, “Continue giving to both sides. Give to whichever side you find inspiring.” He would not encourage anybody to stop giving, even when people converted to Buddhism from other religions. If they had been well-known donors in those other religions, he would encourage them to continue giving. But he wouldn’t force them, either way. The way he taught generosity tells us a lot about the principle of freedom, because it’s in the act of giving that you experience freedom—freedom from your selfishness, freedom from your narrow-mindedness. So this is why the act of giving is a kind of treasure, because it keeps underscoring our freedom to choose. The realization that we don’t have to give into selfish or unskillful mental states no matter how strong they may be. The final treasure that we work on is discernment. In the texts related to this series of teachings, discernment is defined as the ability to see things arising and passing away, particularly in line with the four noble truths, i.e., see things in terms of where there’s a stress, what’s causing it, and what can be done to put an end to it. And the journey to see things in that framework is to comprehend the stress. What is the stress that weighs down the mind? Is it the pain in the body, or is there something else going on? Is it simply the fact of death, or is it the attitude towards death, the fact of aging, illness, and death, or our attitudes toward them? You want to look into that, because it’s largely in the attitude, the facts of aging, illness, and death that can’t be changed, but our attitudes toward them can be changed. And the suffering that comes from unskillful attitudes, that’s precisely the suffering that weighs down the mind. So you want to see that kind of suffering, that kind of stress arising and passing away, so you can begin to gain a sense of what’s causing it. And due to this, you develop the qualities of the path, which eventually you’ll let go of. But you let go of the obvious causes of stress first as you develop the qualities of the path. So seeing things in terms of the Buddha’s teachings on discernment points you to where the skills need to be developed, where you can work on your skills. This is the opportunity that we all have. We have choices, and we can make skillful choices or unskillful choices. And part of the time, the simple question is learning what’s skillful and what’s not, because we do tend to have delusion around that. And the second part of discernment is, if you find it difficult to make the skillful choice, learning how to make it easier for yourself, learning how to talk yourself into making the skillful choice. That also counts as discernment. In this sense of strategy, these are all good things to develop, regardless of whether our life is going to be long or short. As the Buddha said, one day spent developing concentration is better than a hundred years without any concentration at all. One day devoted to discernment is better than a hundred years for a person totally devoid of discernment. So the length of life we have to develop left is not the issue. Because there are these treasures that death doesn’t destroy. These are the things that you can carry with you because they’re part of the mind. They stay with you even as the body passes away and you have this experience of entering another body or entering another world. It’s all going to happen right here. Just as this lifetime feels like right here, the next lifetime is going to feel like right here. We talk about the mind going here, going there. It’s simply one state of becoming replaces another one, just as one dream replaces another. But the analogy of the dream doesn’t mean that the suffering is unreal. The suffering is real, and this is something you really want to work on. This is the big problem. So even though the world is swept away, there are some things that are not swept away, that resist being swept away. They only function as a path to something that is totally beyond the reach of space and time, i.e., deathless. This is why they’re valuable. This is why, whatever amount of time you have, you want to work on the skills that are needed to develop these qualities. Regard these as your treasures. What time you have left, this is where you want to invest it. Of course, the Buddha’s not forcing you to do this. Everything in his teaching is there for you to choose or not choose as you see fit. He was the exact opposite of someone who wanted to force people to see things his way. It was his compassion, though, that he wanted you to know that there is this alternative. What you do with this alternative is up to you. But remember that you will experience this alternative, the results of your actions, the results of your choices. That’s why the Buddha strongly recommended that you try to choose well.

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