Limitations

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I received a letter recently from someone who said she suddenly realized that she was a prisoner in a world of cause and effect. That made it easier to live up to the limitations of the world. I had to remind her that we’re not prisoners. We can use cause and effect to get out. The problem is that the principle of cause and effect is very complex. There are two ways in which you can feel imprisoned by cause and effect. One is if you’re in a system where you have no choices at all. Unfortunately that’s not what the Buddha’s teaching. But the other way is that you’re living in a system where it’s very complex and hard to understand. And that’s causality in the world in which we live. As the Buddha said, there are people who have long memories of the past, going back 40 aeons. Now an aeon is the life of a universe. So imagine that. How long is our universe now? Billions of years. And it’s not even done. And then 40 of those. It’s a long time. But he says that’s a short memory if you’re trying to understand karma. So it’s complex, and as he said, if you tried to tease out all the reasons why you’re experiencing something right now, you’d go crazy. So he’s not teaching us karma to understand where we are, aside from the fact he’s trying to teach us how to understand how we can get out. And that’s where his teaching is really useful. Some things we experience, he says, come from the past. Other things are coming from our present decisions and our present decisions don’t have to be determined by the past. There is that element of freedom. And we have enough wiggle room in causality that we can use that freedom of choice to get to an even greater freedom which is outside of cause and effect entirely. What this means is as long as you’re planning to live in the world, you’re going to find it a frustrating experience. Because there are many things that are happening that you’re experiencing that come from causes in the past that you don’t even know, that you can’t even remember. And you have to deal with them. They do put up limitations. So you do something today, and the karma coming in from the past allows it to have an effect. And you do the same thing tomorrow. And the karma from the past happens to be changing. Because karma bears fruit at different rates. And you don’t get any effect, or you don’t get the effect that you wanted. It’s easy to get upset by this. There’s an old experiment they did with pigeons. They put some pigeons in a cage. The life of the first group of pigeons was pretty simple. There was a red bar and a green bar. If they tapped the red bar, nothing would happen. If they tapped the green bar, they’d get food. They were very well adjusted. In another cage, though, life was more complex. If they tapped the red bar, sometimes they’d get food, and sometimes not. If they tapped the green bar, sometimes they’d get food, and sometimes not. And in the original report, they said that the pigeons in the second group were very neurotic. Recently I talked to someone who was working in a lab where they recreated that experiment. And she said neurotic was not the word. Enraged was the word. They couldn’t figure things out. So this is the way it is living in the world. Things are very complex and hard to figure out. We do our best. But we’re bound to meet up with limitations. So in that area of life, we have to make sure that we learn how to figure out what we can do, and take the opportunities as they come to do something good. This is how we develop our perfections. And that’s the important thing, is you develop the perfections of your character. Generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, equanimity. That’s the traditional list of good qualities that you can develop as you go through lay life, as you go through life in the world. You look to developing those qualities as much as you can. As for the effect you leave behind in the world, you do your best, realizing that there are limitations. But it’s frustrating enough that the Buddha said it’s actually better to get out. And that’s where your freedom to make choices in the present moment comes in. You can choose what you’re going to focus on doing in training your mind. And although you may run into old habits, again, that come from who knows where, and you’re dealing inside with a whole committee of people, who have lots of different opinions about where true happiness can be found, still there’s a way out. So on the one hand you learn how to deal with the limitations in your mind in such a way that you can circumvent them, get around them, realizing that eventually things will open up. That’s the nature of complex systems. You can work the system so the system breaks down. That’s what you’re trying to do here. So things are not ironclad. And the Buddha lays out the path. The path out of the world is a lot simpler than the path in the world. It’s a lot clearer, at least. There may be difficult. There are lots of things that may be hard to do. And here again you run against some of your old karma in terms of how quickly you can develop the path. But the path is clear. No bulletproof path. As for the path in the world, how many folds does it have? Infinite. Whereas this one is laid out. It’s very straightforward. So you take joy in that fact. The problem is that part of the mind doesn’t like to live without limitations. Here we are, we complain about the limitations in the world. Then we get to a place where you can practice. All of a sudden it gets scary. A lot is expected of you in terms of being mindful and alert. And you’re told to practice all the time. And all of a sudden that feels oppressive. So learn to see the possibility of freedom as generally liberating and not an oppression. And as for the demands it’s going to make on you, in Jamaa Abu’s words, the demands of the path are not an execution or trying to cut off your head. They’re not there only to make you miserable. To see it as making your defilements miserable. Again, think of the committee of the mind. You don’t have to identify with every voice that comes up in the mind. You don’t have to identify with every feeling that goes through the body. And John Lee’s picture of what’s going on inside you is even more radical than the committee of the mind. Because he says sometimes it’s not even you in there. There are germs in your system. They have thoughts. And there may be people that you’ve wronged in the past. They may be hovering around in ways that you can’t see. So you’re dealing with all kinds of things. But the important thing is that you recognize that there’s a sense of feeling oppressed by the limitlessness of the path, of the limitlessness of the goal. That’s nothing you want to identify with. You don’t have to say that this is me, this is mine. This is just a voice that’s in there, or a feeling that’s in there. So on the one hand we have to learn how to live with limitations, and on the other we have to live in a path that releases us from a lot of limitations. And the trick is learning how to do that maturely. But don’t feel oppressed by the prospect of freedom. It’s demanding, this path. It requires a lot of not only your willingness to put aside your preferences, but also to use your full mind. There are some meditation techniques that require that you just simply note, note, note, note, note, or scan, scan, scan, and try to deny everything else in the mind. But the bodhisattva path is one that requires your full engagement. It requires imagination to do the path. We don’t think about that that much, but it’s true. To be generous. There are people who just go through the motions. In Thailand they have ready-made packages of gifts to give to monks. So I have to just go down to the store, pick out a package, and that’s it. But there are other people who are more serious about developing generosity, and they want to use their imagination as to what would really be a good gift. And what would be the best way to give it. And the more you get engaged in your generosity in this way, the more you’re going to enjoy it. Which is the whole point of being generous. Give rise to a sense of joy. The same with the precepts. There are times when you’re challenged. How do you maintain your precepts? Say, against lying. At the same time, not give information to people. People who would abuse it. And if you’re up for the challenge, you find that an interesting challenge. It requires your ingenuity. The same with concentration practice. Think about John Lee, working with his breath. Not only when he was in the forest, but also when he came out again. You read his Dhamma talks after he wrote Method Two. Coming up with new ways of thinking about the breath. To deal with the problems that were coming up. And of course, discernment requires imagination. You’ve got a problem, say, with pain. You’ve got a problem with distraction. You’ve got a problem with lust. How can you use your imagination, not in the service of those defilements, like lust and anger. How can you use your imagination in the service of the Dhamma to counteract lust? If you have fantasies that you like to indulge in, how can you poison the fantasy? Put in some details that would make it unattractive. If you find that anger is liberating, that you get to express what you want. How can you imagine the drawbacks in a way that’s really effective to show that, no, this is not an expression of power. It’s a weakness. Years back, after having been in Thailand for two years, I flew back to the States. This is when I was still a layperson. To make a very long story short, a lot of us landed in London and our baggage was still back in France. The ambassador from Vietnam was coming to London, so the ground stewardesses and stewards were looking after his needs. And another ground stewardess, who didn’t usually handle baggage claims, was put in charge. There was a long line and it was very slow. And people started complaining. And she snapped. She told us how lucky we were that there was anybody there at all, so we could just keep quiet. I told myself, “I’m not in Thailand anymore.” In a country where losing your temper is really seen as a weakness. So use your imagination to deal with your defilements, as you use your ability to talk yourself into doing things you may not like to do but will give good results. And to talk yourself out of doing things that you like to do will give long-term benefits. Or bad results. The Buddha mentions this as an important skill, but he doesn’t give any examples. It’s up to you to think of how you can use your imagination. I think of Ajahn Maha Bua, with the different questions he asked about his pains, how he perceived them. Does your pain have an intention? Does your pain have a shape? Is it the same thing as the body? Strange questions. But you begin to realize that we have some strange, subconscious ideas about pain, and they’re not going to come out into the open unless you probe them with strange questions. And as he found, the question that works today may not work tomorrow, so you have to keep coming up with new approaches. We’re not here just to put our minds through a meat grinder. We’re here to use all of our ingenuity, all of our mental powers. It may seem daunting, but don’t think of the alternative. As I said, the Eightfold Path is relatively simple to the many, many, many fold path that wanders lost through the world. So when you feel frustrated with the limitations of the world, realize, well, that’s the nature of the world. Learning how to live with those limitations and do your best around them. When you meet up with limitations on the path, learn to do your best to work your way around them. But don’t be scared by the goal that it offers, being totally free from limitations. There are aspects of the path where you suddenly find yourself freed from your daily responsibilities. You don’t know what to do with yourself. You complain, complain, complain, “I never have time to myself.” And then you get time to yourself, and you’re at your wit’s end. So learn to enjoy the limitlessness that this path offers. And you find that what you start out with as limited resources can take you to some places way beyond them.

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