Meaningful Freedom

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I’m aware of only two places in the canon where the Buddha actually went out and found somebody else and argued with them. Actually there were four. One case was the the Jains who claimed that when they were doing their austerities they could tell that their austerities were having an effect because of the burning sense they had, were saying that they were burning off old karma. You would ask them, “Have you noticed that when you stop doing the austerities that the burning sensations go away?” “Well, yes.” “So how can you say that it’s the result of past karma? It’s what you’re doing right now.” The other three cases come under one sutta, which is why I said there were two. In those three cases the Buddha talks to someone who claims that everything that you experience is the result of past karma. Another person says everything you experience is the result of the acts of a creator god. And the third one said that whatever you experience has no cause at all. Totally random. In all those cases he said in that case someone is a killer or a stealer. He engages in those dissects, not because of anything they’re doing in the present moment, but it’s because of something else. Either the act of the creator god, past actions, or it has no cause at all. It’s just random. And if that’s the case, then there is no practice to put an end to suffering. People suffer and they’re left bewildered by their suffering. They’re defenseless, unprotected. Energy comes up in the mind and they have no reason to think that they can say no to it. And so much of the practice is just that. Something comes into the mind and you have the choice to say yes or no. The point he’s making is that things that you’re experiencing right now are not totally determined by the past. You have some input into what you’re going to experience right now. Like you’re sitting here meditating. You’ve made up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath. And whether you stay with the breath depends on your continuing with that intention. Also being mindful to remember the intention so you don’t forget and just start wandering off thoughtlessly. And you have to be alert to what you’re doing. If the mind is with the breath you try to be very sensitive to the breath. Because you’re trying to, in the Buddhist words, create a sense of rapture, a sense of pleasure. Then think of that rapture and pleasure spreading through the body. That requires sensitivity and your full attention, which is what alertness is all about. And then finally there’s the desire to do this well. You have to be ardent about it. Because if the mind wanders off, you have to bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. You’re the one making the decision right now. You want to be very clear about that fact. Otherwise there’s no perfecting of the skill, getting the mind to settle down and to be one. Eko de power. Like we chatted just now. And this will depend partly on what you’re doing right now and partly on things that you’ve done in the past. If you’ve been neglecting the practice of mindfulness, then it’s going to be harder to stay mindful of the breath. In other words, you have some choices in the present moment, but you don’t have totally free reign. And how much of choice you have, the only way you’re going to find that out is by pushing the envelope, doing your best to create something good right here. If your will were totally free, then your actions would be pretty meaningless. You would do something now, but would have no influence on what you would do in the next moment or the next moment, if those next moments were also totally free. Like swimming around in a vacuum. There’d be no resistance. You wouldn’t be able to move forward, up, down, any direction at all. There has to be some resistance so you can propel yourself. In the same way, there has to be some resistance that’s created by your past karma that provides you with the obstacles you have to deal with right now, but also provides you with the opportunities. So you want to take advantage of those opportunities. Some of those opportunities simply come in randomly. Others have to do with the skills you’ve developed in the past. Whatever skills you’ve brought to meditation in the past, whatever works, you bring that out. And if it doesn’t quite work right now, well, you can make adjustments, realizing that what you’re going to be facing at any moment in the meditation will vary depending on your past karma. It’s like going into a kitchen today, and you have certain foods in the refrigerator and certain foods in the pantry, and so you can make food out of what you’ve got there. And you come in tomorrow and it turns out that the mice have eaten some of the food, or somebody else has put some new foods in there. So you deal with what you’ve got. Make the best food you can out of what you’ve got. That requires you to have some skill. This too is an influence that comes in from the past. So you’re trying to take advantage of the good influences that are coming in and explore where they offer opportunities for freedom of choice. So on the issue of free will, the Buddha wouldn’t say that we have totally free will, but he does say we have the power of some choices. This is why what he taught was not just a body of knowledge or a bunch of theories. He had a very low opinion of people who theorized about things and, as he said, hammered them out with logic. He was more comfortable with comparing the practice to the skills that you can develop. The skills of carpentry, the skills of cooking, the skills of warriors. You explore your freedom of choice, the range you have right now, as you try to master these skills. The skills of mindfulness, the skills of concentration, all the skills of the path. So you have some freedom of choice, and our will does matter. After all, we’re just automatons, forced to do things through the power of whatever comes out from the past. The idea that life has no purpose, which would be the meaning of that, wouldn’t bother us. Nobody would get depressed from a lack of purpose. They’d just be happily humming along like machines. But the fact that people feel directionless, purposeless, and it’s really painful, that shows that we instinctively know that we want to have some power over our minds, want to have some power over our lives, and that we’re moving in a direction. As the Buddha said, we create our aggregates out of the potentials from the past. For the sake of something. The word “for the sake of” has an arrow. We’re aiming somewhere. This is what the intentional element of karma is all about. It’s aimed. The best way to learn about the mind is to aim it at doing something good. Getting really sensitive to what’s going on inside. So, exercise your freedom of choice right now, to whatever extent you have it, and see where it can take you. Take advantage of the resistance offered by the past, so you can propel yourself forward. Think of the skills you have, and work on them. Use them. The more you use their skills, the more freedom you’ll finally have. And where this freedom comes from, the Buddha doesn’t say. And it’s not the freedom of the unconditioned. It’s a limited range of freedom. But you do have this range of freedom. So take advantage of it. The people who say that they’re happy when they hear that they’re not responsible for anything, there’s nobody there, we’re riding around in a driverless bus, and they like the idea, there’s something really wrong. Not just from the point of view of the Dharma, it’s just wrong in general. Maybe they were shamed horribly in the past, or accused of doing something or being responsible for something they try to deny. But it’s a very unhealthy attitude. And it certainly doesn’t allow for putting it into suffering. This is a path that you follow. A path that you develop. And in the course of developing it, again, there is that sense of “for the sake of” something. There’s an arrow there. Because after all, the “to” is fabricated. The “to” is made out of aggregates. And these aggregates give you some resistance, but they also open some opportunities. Think of the principle of causality that the Buddha taught. In some cases, the effects arise together with the causes, and they disappear when the causes disappear. In other cases, if the cause comes, the effect can come later. The cause disappears, and the effect can also disappear later. Think of trees. They come from tiny seeds. But you plant a seed and you don’t get a tree right away. It takes time. But eventually, every tree will have to die, because the seeds are impermanent. But it may take a long time. As for things that happen together, think of putting your finger in a flame. It burns right away. You don’t have to wait until your next lifetime for it to burn. You take it out, there’s some pain that remains, but the burning stops. So right now, you’re focused on the breath. You’ve noticed that holding certain perceptions in the mind will have an immediate impact on the breath. Other perceptions, you hold them in mind. It takes a while for the effect of the perception to take hold. So you’re working with causes of both kinds. And that’s a lot of the skill of the meditation right there. Figuring out what you do right now, or reading the effects right now, and trying to figure out, well, is what I’m experiencing right now the result of what I’m doing right now, or does it come from something else in the past? And that’s something you can master only over time. But it’s good to keep these two principles of causality. in mind. Because they’re what allows for the sense of patterns in behavior that you can depend on, that you can learn from, skills you can master, that will then stick with you over time. And at the same time, freedom of choice, opportunities for doing things you’ve never done before. After all, we’re here to attain the unattained, to reach the as-yet-unreached. That means we have to do things that we haven’t as yet, not yet done. But the opportunity is there, so look for it. This is when the Buddha talks about the insights that come from concentration, the powers that come from concentration. They come when there is an opportunity, when there’s an opening. You know, the opening may be shaped by your past karma, but you want to be ready for it when it comes, especially for the opening for insight. That too is a possibility. And the opportunities and the openings may not come all the time, so you want to be ready for when they do. It’s like being a hunter. You don’t know where the game is going to be, or when it’s going to come. You have an idea of where it’s likely to come, but you can’t make any agreement with the game. “It’s going to come at this time, and I’ll get you, and I’ll take you home, so I can have dinner when I want it.” You go where you think the game is likely, and you sit very quietly, but very alert. Quietly so that you don’t scare the game away. Very alert so that you notice when it comes. It’s the same with insight. To find it, to see it, you have to be very quiet and very alert. That’s quite a skill. I was talking with an anthropologist one time, and he was saying that when anthropologists go study primitive cultures nowadays, they like to master the different skills of the people in the society, so they can get an inside take on what it’s like to live in that society. And one of the skills that’s hardest for anthropologists to master is hunting, because it requires so much mental training in being alert and quiet at the same time, and very patient. These are skills that are not nurtured very much in our society, which means that we have to work on them that much harder. But you’ve got the opportunity now, so make the most of it.

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