

The Perfection of Freedom

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Life is full of limitations. We live in a very imperfect world. It starts with the fact of eating, that question in the Novice's Questions: "What is one? All being subsist on food." Right there is a really dismaying fact. Life depends on eating. And it's not simply a matter sipping the dew off the grass. The fact that we eat involves a lot of suffering, and that's just to keep going. And the feeding is not just physical, there's a lot of emotional and mental feeding going on. Inter-being is inter-eating.

On top of that, there are the limitations each of us suffers from, in terms of our knowledge, our wealth, our energy, our health, our life span. The world seems be closing in all the time. When you have a chance to step back a little bit and not be totally concerned with your own suffering, you begin to see other people's suffering as well—and it can be overwhelming. There's so much suffering in the world, and we have only so much energy, only so much time to help. So what are you going to do in this imperfect world?

They talk about developing the perfections as one way of conceiving the path. *Perfection* though, is a really imprecise word for that. The Pali word *parami* means what's foremost: what's of foremost importance in your life. But none of the qualities in the list can be totally perfected. Generosity: You can't be perfectly generous, because there are constraints on what you have to give. Virtue: You can't be perfectly virtuous. Even if you hold by the five precepts, the five precepts cover only so much. You can't be totally sure that you're not killing anything at all, or that you are not taking anything, that your words are absolutely true all the time. You do your best. And that's what the precepts are for, to keep working at your best as part of training the mind.

But even there, in these different perfections, there are compromises. There is one area, though, where there's the possibility of perfection, and that's perfect freedom. That's what nibbana is all about. The word nibbana means unbinding, loosening up all the constraints on the mind, so that it's totally unbound by space, time, or any conditions at all. That's the only possibility of total perfection at all. Meanwhile, though, there is the conditioned freedom we have in the present moment, which is what enables us to choose whether we want to head in that direction or in other directions.

This is what we try to maximize as we meditate to develop the qualities of mind, to explore and expand the possibility of freedom of choice. That's the

freedom that we can tap into at any time. Most people don't. They have the potential for choice, but they don't make the most of it. They develop some skills and stop right there. They lead their lives within whatever limited range of skills they have. And they have a certain set series of narratives. This is where the old idea of *Games People Play* comes from. There are certain narratives that people keep living out, over and over and over in their lives, both in the worlds they create in the mind and in the interactions they have with other people. You imagine a certain world and then, all of a sudden, there's a particular role you're playing in that world. We very rarely change roles or expand our ability to take on new roles.

What this means is that we don't learn new skills. Why is it important to learn new skills? Because the more skills you learn, (1) the more skillfully you can deal with the situations of life, and (2), the more you begin to explore the potential for freedom here in the present moment. You give yourself more choices. As you develop skills, in particular the skills of meditation, you develop qualities of mind that enable you to step back and look at what really needs to be done, to question your knee-jerk reactions, to ask yourself: Is there another, better way of dealing with these issues, whatever the issues may be?

Mindfulness helps here as it keeps in mind the range of skills you've developed. And also alertness, which allows you to see things in the present moment that you might not have seen if you simply kept your old blinders on. Concentration keeps you focused here. Not only that, but given the fact that the mind is always feeding, concentration gives you something good to feed on, a sense of well-being that comes from within, that doesn't depend on people outside or anything outside, doesn't take anything away from anyone.

When the mind is well fed, it's more willing to look at alternatives, to look at its old ways of doing things and say, "Maybe there's a different way. Maybe that old way of thinking, that old way of reacting, is not really in my best interests or the best interests of people around me. Maybe it's time to think of something different." When the mind is well fed, it sees a lot of its old habits as unnecessary. Not only unnecessary, but also harmful, stressful, causing suffering.

Then there's discernment, which allows you to see distinctions. The mind has a tendency to glom a lot of things together and not really look very carefully. It says, "Oh, that's this, this is that." It's that old world again, so you know your role for that old world and you just take on the old role, even though it may not be that same old world. The discernment enables you to see, say, when you have a sensation, what is the physical side of the sensation? In other words, the solidity,

liquidity, warmth, the energy. And what is the feeling side, the feeling of pleasure or pain? Those are two very different things.

When you can see the distinction between them, you begin to see how fleeting pleasure and pain can be. They come and go, come and go, come and go. Yet we live our lives trying to feed off those pleasures—and end up feeding on a lot of pain.

So when you develop these qualities—mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment—they put you in a position where you begin to see what’s actually going on and what the alternatives are to how you’re going to react, where you can make a difference, where you can’t, where there’s an opening to more freedom.

This possibility of freedom is something that can be perfected, but it’s something each of us has to do for him or herself alone, because this is a question of skill. No one can make you more skillful than you are. The best they can do is to point out certain ideas, certain possibilities, help to expand your sense of what’s possible.

I know in my own experience with Ajaan Fuang, that was a lot of what it was all about: his pointing out things that I’ve never thought of as possible at all. Beginning with simple things like, what’s going on in your body? Is there energy movement? How is it related to the breath? I had never thought of that possibility.

So learn to explore it. Explore possibilities in terms of the amount of effort you can put into the practice, the amount of consistency you can put into the practice, the possibilities in terms of looking at the consequences of your actions. Don’t think just in terms of different ways of responding to what you see around you, but also in terms of new ways of *seeing* what’s around you.

This is what the practice can do for us: It expands our awareness of the potential freedom we have in the present moment to make skillful choices. This is the most important aspect of the Buddha’s teachings, the possibility for skillfulness. As he said, if it weren’t possible for people to develop skill in their thoughts, words, and deeds, he wouldn’t have taught. But it is possible. That means we do have a certain amount of free will, a certain amount in the sense that we can expand it. Most of us, though, don’t take advantage of the possibilities, so it just stays limited, and we act on automatic pilot, following our own old habitual ways like a windup doll.

But we’re not windup dolls. We have the ability to sense suffering: our own suffering, the suffering of people around us. We have the ability to see connections in our actions, between what we do and the things we experience. That knowledge can teach us. We can learn from that. Meditation is a process of

learning how to expand on that possibility to make the most of it, to perfect this potential for freedom.

That's the one perfection that really can get perfect. It is possible to touch perfect freedom, not constrained by anything at all. We can reach it through expanding our sense of what it means to be aware of the present moment, to see how much we do shape the present moment through our intentions. So we keep digging down, digging down in that spot—the intentions of the mind—because they're the aspect of the mind that's closest to freedom.

What this means on an everyday level is that whatever the situation that presents itself to you as a result of your past actions, you have the choice to respond in a skillful or unskillful way. The more you take advantage that possibility to be skillful, the greater your freedom will be.

So you don't have to keep responding in your old ways. There are alternatives. But it's important to see how much you are shaping the present moment.

When we meditate, we're focusing on an intention, the intention to stay with the breath. As you master the ability to stick with that one intention, you're going to learn an awful lot about intention, as you're going to learn an awful lot about the breath. But the knowledge about intention is going to be more important, because it's in that direction that perfect freedom lies.