

Free to Choose

July 4, 2015

One of the Buddha's insights on the night of his awakening was that the universe just goes around and around, life goes around and around, sometimes up sometimes down. Where it comes from, he says, is inconceivable, and it's capable of just keeping on going as long as there's craving. As long as there's consciousness that feeds on craving, which gives rise to more craving, the process can just keep on going indefinitely. And it doesn't serve any purpose. It's not going anywhere in particular.

Now, that insight can be depressing if you think about it in one way, but it's liberating if you think about it in another way: that you're not here to serve some little part of some larger universal purpose. You can give your own meaning to your life. You're free to choose what you want to do with your life, what you want to do with the abilities you have.

The way the Buddha used that realization was to focus in on the problem of suffering. Each of us has our own sufferings. They're part of our experience that we don't share with anyone else. You can sit and look at somebody suffer, and you can feel sympathy for them, but you don't actually feel their pain. And no one else can feel your pain.

The Buddha's basic message is that you can focus on that pain and suffering as a worthwhile issue, and on getting rid of that pain as a worthwhile goal. Other people may say that you should hang around and help them with whatever issues they want to deal with in the world, but the Buddha said you don't have to. You can deal with your main issue. It would be nice if we could clean up everybody else's sufferings, but we can't because each person's suffering is the result of each person's lack of skill: That's one of the meanings of *avijja*.

You can't make other people skillful, but you can develop skills on your own and you can use those skills to deal with this issue, because each of us does have this area of our awareness that nobody else can know.

You look at the blue sky, and everybody agrees that the sky is blue, but how do you know that other people's blue is the same as your blue? Even something as basic as that we don't share. That's not really a big issue, of course, but the big issue inside this area of your awareness is the fact that you are suffering, and the mind is causing itself to suffer, and yet the suffering isn't necessary. The Buddha is saying that you are free to learn how to put an end to it, and you can devote your time to putting an end to it, and it's an honorable use of your time, regardless of how much the world may tell us that we have to hang around and help them with their issues or their causes or whatever.

If you want to be generous you can help, but there comes a point where all the causes can't help you when aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes. And the Buddha is saying, "Go ahead. You are free to focus on how to solve that issue so that when aging illness and death come, you don't suffer."

That's an independence that's really worth while.

So look what you're doing right now see what you're doing that's unskillful, that's causing unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering, and work on that—remembering that if you keep on coming back, you may be able to help people with some things, but you're also putting a burden on others.

To begin with, you're putting a burden on your parents. One of the traditional parts of an ordination in Thailand is a chant before the ordination ceremony that sometimes can go on for hours—depending on how much the parents want to hear it—teaching the young naga, the young monk-to-be, about all the sufferings that his mother went through in raising him. Most of the chant deals with the sufferings she endured while she was pregnant with him. This is to give rise to a sense of gratitude and a desire to help pay her back. One of the ways to repay that debt traditionally is to ordain and to dedicate the merit to her.

But the chant should also be an incentive to say to yourself, "I don't want to come back because I'm going to cause pain to somebody else. Somebody is going to have to carry me around in her womb for nine months."

Think of all the time and energy that parents give to raising their children. On the one hand it gives rise to a sense of gratitude but it also gives rise to a sense of samvega.

When the Buddha talks about how many mothers you've had, he said that it's hard to find someone who hasn't been your mother at some point, it's hard to find someone who hasn't been your father, someone who hasn't been your son or daughter, brother, sister. We've all been through this in all the various combinations many, many, many times. And as he says, the proper reaction to that is to want to get out.

You want to find release from this, because it's oppressive when you think about it.

Today I was looking at the Internet. *Tricycle* has put my article on samvega online, and I looked at one of the comments and it was someone saying, "This is why Mahayana had to develop, to get past this very narrow view that the world is suffering.

After all, surely the pleasures of walking in the woods and sipping a cup of tea are not temporary pleasures." I read that and I kept thinking, "This must be a satire. How can anyone sincerely think like this?"

If you think that this is what life is all about, that this is all there is and you might as well just learn how to accept it—well, that's one way of looking at it, but it's not the wisest. The Buddha said, No, you don't have to accept this. You don't have to come back. You are free to put an end to this suffering that you feel and that nobody else can feel for you and nobody else can take away for you.

People can soothe the pain a little bit, but when you're really suffering the only things that are going to get you past it are the skills that you learn. You learn the skills of *vijja* so that you replace the *avijja* that causes suffering, and the Buddha is offering to teach you those skills. He sets them out and says very clearly, "This is how it's done." Some of the instructions are easy to follow, others are hard to follow, but they're all worthwhile.

You know that example he gives: If you could make a deal that every morning for 100 years they would stab you with 100 spears and every noon they would stab you with another 100 spears and every evening another 100 spears—300 spears a day for 100 years, but you'd be guaranteed at the end that you'd reach awakening—

he said it would be a deal worth making. The freedom that comes, the sense of total relief that comes when you're past suffering, is that valuable.

Even with just stream entry, he says that the amount of suffering left for someone who's a stream enterer is like a little bit of dirt under your fingernail, as compared to the dirt in the entire earth, which is like the amount of suffering left for those who haven't reached that point.

That's a lot of suffering.

So this is our independence: our ability to focus on this part of our awareness that we don't share with anyone else, and to straighten it out, so that we don't have to feel the suffering that weighs each of us down.

It's an independence that has a double meaning. One, you are free to focus on this issue. The universe doesn't have any larger purpose for you to which you have to subsume your desire for happiness so that you can serve some larger purpose. And two, when you master these skills, you really are free. There's nothing that weighs the mind down at all.

From that point forward, what you have left in life you can give to others, to help them learn these skills as well. That's the kindest thing you can do. This is why we pass these things on. We've found the value that comes from following the Buddha's teachings and we want to preserve them so other people can find that value as well.

So for this hour, you're free to focus on the problem that you find inside. These opportunities don't come easily. All too often, we have lots of other responsibilities in the world, but at the moment you've got this freedom, so make the most of it.