

Not the Predictable Thing

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Once, I was giving a Dhamma talk in New York City. As part of the introduction, the person introducing me mentioned that I was a New Yorker myself, having been born out on the eastern end of Long Island and grown up on a potato farm. Even though it was a farm, it was not that far from the city. After the talk, a woman came up and mentioned that she and her family had had a vacation home in Cutchogue, which is just a few miles down the road from where I grew up. She was amazed a little potato-farm boy from eastern end Long Island would end up studying the Dhamma in Thailand.

At first I felt a little insulted. Don't farm boys have hearts? Can't they dream? Can't they aspire to something better than what they've got? But then I realized that this is a pattern throughout the history of Buddhism: people doing unexpected things, unpredictable things.

A similar incident happened when I was in Thailand. Someone new to the monastery noticed a Western monk at the monastery and so asked Ajaan Fuang, "How is it that Westerners can ordain?" His response was, "Don't Westerners have hearts?" Maybe he was sensitive to that issue because he himself had been looked down on many times. After all, he was a peasant boy, orphaned when he was very young. Looking at him from outside, you wouldn't expect anything much out of his life. But he was able to make himself something special—not because he was trying to *make* himself into something special, but he wanted to *find* something special in life.

This goes for almost all of the great ajaans: sons of peasants. Looking at them from the outside, you would have predicted either a life trying to struggle up the social ladder, or being stuck at the bottom of the social ladder, or rebelling in predictable ways. As Ajaan Fuang once told me, if it hadn't been for the Dhamma, he could have very easily ended up in a life of crime. But fortunately, he saw that there was the possibility of something better, and so he did the unpredictable thing.

This is a tradition that goes back to the Buddha himself. The predictable thing for a young prince back in those days would have been to enjoy his life of pleasures, perhaps get involved in a war or two. But as he saw, that kind of life was simply looking for happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die. He himself was going to age, grow ill, and die. Isn't there something better?

So he left home. And at first he did some predictable things: He went to study with other teachers. But then he started doing unpredictable things: When the teachers offered to have him teach as well, he realized that this wasn't what he wanted. He wanted something better. So he tried something else that was predictable. People who have been indulging in pleasure for a long time and finally see the drawbacks of that kind of life tend to go to the other extreme. So that's just what he did: six years of self-torment, to the point where he realized he had tortured himself more than anybody else had ever done. But he saw that it was a blind alley. If he continued down that route, he would die.

That's when he did something else unpredictable: He said there must be another way. And he found it.

This may be one of the reasons why he was so dead set against determinism. When he found the true way and was teaching it, he wasn't the kind of person who would usually go out and look for people to argue with. But there were a few cases where he did. And one of them was when he went to some teachers who taught that everything you experience in the present moment is determined by the past: either by the actions of a creator deity or your own past karma. And he would argue with those people: If everything you experience right now is determined by the past, he said, then if you're going to kill right now, steal right now, have illicit sex right now, that's all been determined by the past. You can't have any choice in the matter. In that case, there is no "should be done" or "shouldn't be done." People just do what they have to do. When you teach that, you're leaving people unprotected, bewildered.

In other words, they're just stuck in that original problem of suffering: They're bewildered by the pain. And because they're told that they have no way of dealing with it, they're unprotected. He saw the importance of the fact that there *is* an opportunity for freedom in the present moment. Not everything you're experiencing right now has been determined by the past. You can make a difference. You don't have to do the predictable thing.

As when you're sitting here right now, when things are going well, the predictable thing is to get carried away and complacent. But what if you did something unpredictable? Tell yourself, "Okay, no, I've got something going good here. What's the best thing to do with it? Is this the time to maintain it? Or is this the time to use it for something else?"

When things are *not* going well, the predictable thing is to get upset, and you can go into a downward spiral. But how about doing the unpredictable thing: *not* getting upset? See what happens when you're with a state of mind in the present moment that's not good, but you're not upset by it. This doesn't mean you say,

“Well, I’ll just accept it and be okay with it”—that’s another predictable thing. Ask yourself, “What can I learn? What would be the best thing to do with this state of mind?”

That attitude is what allowed the Buddha to do those unpredictable things. He kept asking, “What’s the best thing to do?” Once he got into right concentration, he didn’t just stay in concentration. He asked himself, “Is there knowledge that can be derived from this state of concentration?” And the first question he asked himself was: “How about previous births? Have I been born before?” And he saw that he had. He could see back, many, many eons.

The predictable thing *then* would have been to set himself up as a teacher with knowledge of past lives. But he said, “No. What’s the best thing to *do* with this knowledge?” That question led to another question: “What causes the patterns and the ups and downs of previous lifetimes?” That’s when he gained his second knowledge: seeing beings dying and being reborn in line with their karma, and seeing how complex karma was. There’s a basic principle: You act on skillful intentions and you get good results, good rebirths. You act on unskillful intentions, you get bad results, bad rebirths. But it’s not automatic that what you do in one lifetime will determine what’s going to happen in the next lifetime, because you have other karmic influences coming in from the past, perhaps other lifetimes, and the influence of your views and intentions at the moment of death. Those actions can have an influence as well.

Here, again, he could have set himself up as a teacher, teaching people about karma and rebirth. But then he asked himself, “What’s the best use of *this* knowledge?” One of the things he had seen in the way karma worked out was that your state of mind at death could actually go against a lot of karmic tendencies coming in from the past. In other words, if your state of mind at death was really good, it could compensate for a lot of bad things you’d done. If your state of mind at death was bad, it could delay the results of good karma—which meant that the state of your mind in the present moment doesn’t *have* to be shaped by the past. And it can have an influence to counteract influences coming in from the past.

So the next question was, “What’s the best use of *that* knowledge?” Here the answer was, “Well, see what you can do in the present moment to get out of this system entirely.” That’s a question that would have been totally unpredictable—aside from the fact that the Buddha-to-be really wanted freedom. This is the one thing you could say was predictable once you knew him as a person: He would do everything for the sake of freedom.

But people like that are hard to predict. Sociologists look at classes of people and say, “This class of people will tend in this direction; that class of people will

tend in that direction.” But what they can’t see is who among those people would really do everything for the sake of freedom.

Even the Buddha himself couldn’t say. There was that time when he was asked if the whole world was going to go to awakening, or half the world, or a third of the world. He refused to answer. The brahman who asked the question seemed to be upset, so Ven. Ananda pulled him aside and gave him an analogy: Suppose there’s a fortress with an intelligent gatekeeper. He wanders around the fortress, inspecting the wall. And, aside from the one main gate into the fortress, he doesn’t see a hole big enough even for a cat to slip through. So as a result, what does he know? He doesn’t know how many people are going to come in and out of the fortress, but he *does* know that if they’re going to come in and go out, they’re going to come in and out through the gate.

In the same way, the Buddha doesn’t know how many people are going to choose to want to do the unpredictable thing and go for total freedom. But the ones who *will* go for total freedom will have to follow this path: the ten guidelines for moral action, the four establishings of mindfulness, the seven factors for awakening.

So remember, we have this opportunity to be unpredictable. We live in a monastery where the routine is pretty standard. The predictable things are either to simply fall into the routine or to try to rebel against the routine. The unpredictable thing is to use this opportunity to find freedom, freedom from your defilements—because the defilements are giving you the worst routines. When the meditation goes well, the defilements tell you to get excited or complacent. When the meditation doesn’t go well, the defilements will tell you, “Maybe it’s better that you give up.” Or they just get you depressed. So try to work free of the routines of the defilements. You know your predictable patterns, but you don’t have to follow them.

That’s why the Buddha, when he gave his shorter synopsis of the awakening, boiled it down to a pattern of causality in which what happens in the present moment is shaped partly by the past, but also partly by independent decisions in the present moment itself. And those are free. They don’t have to be predictable.

So take advantage of that. It’s because of that principle that meditation can take you someplace that you wouldn’t have predicted: something unpredictably good.