

The Will to Awaken

January 22, 2009

There's a passage where the Buddha describes his knowledge of the fate of other people, or the destinations of other people. He says it's like watching a man walking along a path that doesn't fork off in any other direction. It goes straight to one destination. And the Buddha notes that if the man continues to follow that path, he's going to end up at that destination. Notice: It's contingent on the man's continuing on that path. After all, he might choose not to follow that path. He might change his mind, turn around.

There's another passage where the Buddha is asked, "Is the whole world going to release? Half the world? A third?" And he refuses to answer. Ananda, who's afraid that the man who asked the question is going to get upset, takes the man aside and says, "It's like a gatekeeper to a fortress. There's only one gate to the fortress. The gatekeeper walks around the fortress and he doesn't see even the slightest opening in the fortress wall, not even one big enough for a cat to slip through. So he comes to the conclusion—he doesn't know how many people are going to come in to the fortress, how many people will leave the fortress—but he does know that if they're going to come in or leave, they have to go through the gate. Again, the point here is that we have the choice to go into the gate or not go into the gate. It's up to us. It's a free choice. It's not imposed on us by our nature. We have to will it.

To get on the path to Awakening, you have to desire it. It's an act of will. It's a truth of the will. William James talks about two kinds of truths: truths of the observer and truths of the will. A truth of the observer is the type where you see cause and effect that are totally independent of your desire for them to be in a certain way: knowledge about astronomy, say, or about the laws of nature. You have to take your desire out of the equation if you're going to see these truths. You have to be, as much as possible, a non-interfering observer. You interfere a little bit here and there in order to test cause and effect, to see exactly what cause is connected to what effect, but you have to accept the results whether you like them or not. If your likes get in the way, you're not really going to see those truths.

Truths of the will, however, are a different matter entirely. You have to want them to be true in order for them to become true. If you're going to become a good pianist, a good carpenter, you have to *want* those things in order for them to happen. It helps if you have some natural inclination in that direction or some natural talents. But to be really good, you have to have a strong desire. Without that desire, they're not going to happen. In this case, your likes and dislikes are important. They're actually a part of the truth.

This is the way it is with the path. We're not here just simply watching things passively. What we're learning is not a truth of the observer, it's a truth of the will. Awakening is something that has to be pursued. The deathless, of course, is not created by your desire. But the path is. It's something fabricated.

When you look at the qualities that lead to awakening—things like the ten perfections—they come under the headings of what the Buddha talks of as the

adhithhana dhamma, things that are willed. There are actually four: discernment, truth, relinquishment, and peace or calming. All of these are things that we have to will in order to find them.

Now the problem with will of course is it can be blind, which is why discernment comes first. You want to will discernment for it to happen. It's not a question of whether you're born smart or not smart. It comes from developing two qualities. One is having conviction. Again this is where that issue of the truth of the will comes in. You have to be convinced that this is a worthwhile activity: trying to develop your discernment, trying to find awakening. You have to be convinced that it's possible. If you don't believe it's possible, it's not going to happen. It's like the person stuck in the woods. If you don't believe that there's a path out of the woods, you're not going to try to look for it. If you don't try to look for it, you're not going to find it.

So conviction that your actions really do make a difference, conviction that the Buddha really did gain awakening: these are an important part of discernment. The five strengths that end in discernment begin with conviction. As one of the *ajans* in Thailand once said, it's not the case that discernment begins with perceptions or ideas or concepts. It begins with conviction, that there is a way out, and that it can be found through your own actions.

The other aspect of discernment is that you see what the important questions are. As the Buddha said, the big question is seeing where there's suffering, where there's stress, what's causing it, and what actions put an end to it. Those are the important questions in life. When you learn how to focus on those, it cuts through a lot of garbage. And then when you look at what qualities need to be developed in order to put an end to suffering, you find that they're also qualities required to improve your discernment. You need to develop more mindfulness, more alertness, more concentration. And part of that quest for the end of suffering involves goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people around you—because you realize that if your happiness depends on their suffering, it's not going to happen. They're going to try to block it or undo it. So you have to find a happiness that's harmless to everybody.

So that's the first thing you will: the will to discernment. It helps you see what goal is a good goal, and also what is clearly a good way to attain that goal. You're going to have to learn a lot of this path on your own as you go along. It's something you discover. All too often we read a book saying what it's going to be like: You're going to gain this insight, and then that insight. The problem is, when you've read those descriptions, you can force the mind in such a position that it starts having those insights. But that doesn't necessarily mean that they're true, that they're genuine insights. You have to learn how to be more observant on your own, more alert, to see what insights actually bring freedom from suffering. This means you have to look all around you, and all around your insights.

As *Ajaan Lee* once said, when you gain an insight, you have to turn it over to see to what extent it really is true, to what extent it's false, to what extent the opposite would be true. Only then can you know that you're not just programming yourself or trying to clone what you've read. Again that would be a case of trying to make your discernment grow from your concepts, as opposed to the conviction there's got to be a way out. You've got to find that way for

yourself, with the Buddha's directions of course, but it's based on your own powers of mindfulness and alertness so you catch yourself to make sure that your defilements don't get in the way. So that's how we will discernment.

The next thing we will is truthfulness. Part of truthfulness is the quality of self-honesty. As the Buddha said, "Let a person come who is honest and no deceiver, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma." This is the first prerequisite for getting on the path: to be truthful. This doesn't mean just telling the truth, but also means deciding which you've got to do and sticking with it, being true to your intentions. This is where the precepts or virtue as a perfection comes in. Once you've realized that you don't want to harm anybody, you've got to follow through and really abstain from activities that are harmful, whether it's easy to abstain or not. Discernment helps here, in its practical mode. When you find that a precept goes against your desires, you've got to use your discernment to find ways of making yourself want to stick with it, making it easier to stick with it, learning to cast a jaundiced eye on your desires, realizing that they promise all kinds of things, but can you really trust them? You use your discernment to stay true to your intention and to find skillful ways of taking the wind out of the sails of your unskillful desires. That way you can hang on to what you know is really in your best interests, and in the best interests of the people around you.

The third thing that we have to will is relinquishment, learning how to let go. This is where the perfections of renunciation and giving come in. Giving here means giving away not only material things, but also our unskillful desires, giving up our unskillful ways of holding onto things. Sometimes it comes naturally, easily, and sometimes it doesn't. And again this is where you need to use your discernment, learning strategies to make you more and more inclined to give up things you have to give up, things that get in the way, the lesser pleasures that get in the way of greater happiness.

This is not a matter of just giving up things that are obviously unskillful. I did a survey once on the topic of relinquishment in books of American Buddhism. In the few cases where they actually talk about relinquishment, they focus on relinquishing unhealthy relationships and relinquishing your controlling mindset. We don't really need the Buddha tell you relinquish those things. Your parents can tell you to relinquish unhealthy relationships. If you have a psychotherapist, the therapist will tell you to relinquish your controlling mindset. There are a lot of things that are really pleasurable, that society actually encourages you to look for, But the Buddha says, look, you've got to give them up as they lead to unhealthy attachments down the line. Your attachment to sensual pleasures and sensual desires: that's the big one. Your attachment to thoughts about, plans about sensual pleasures. That's what you have to learn how to renounce.

An important step is learning to see the rewards of renunciation. It's not going to leave you deprived. It really is restful to the mind. It really gives peace to the mind. There's a famous story about the monk, a former king, sitting in the forest exclaiming, "What bliss! What bliss!" And it turns out he's not pining after the joys he felt when he was a king before he became a monk. He's exclaiming over how blissful he is now that he can sit under the tree without having to worry about all the people who wanted to kill him when he was a king, all the people who wanted to take away his pleasures and wealth. That's one of the pleasures of renunciation, that sense of freedom, and nobody's going to try to steal that from

you. And as the monk said to the Buddha, his mind was now like a wild deer: It was free. You've got to learn how to think in those ways when the desire for sensuality really gets strong, to see that when you can renounce it, you're free.

And again you have to will that. It doesn't come naturally. As the Buddha once said, even *he* didn't find it easy to will renunciation. His mind didn't leap up at the idea. But his desire for a deathless happiness was strong enough and he coupled it with the discernment that could help him find ways of reasoning with his mind, find tactics for giving the mind pleasures that didn't have to depend on sensuality—primarily the pleasure of jhana, the pleasure of concentration. When you have an alternative source of pleasure like that, you realize that you're trading candy for gold. But the ability to make that trade is something you have to will.

The fourth thing is peace. The Pali word *upasama* also means stilling, or calm. And there are two perfections that are associated with that: patience and equanimity. The word patience can also mean endurance: the ability to put up with difficult things. Here again you use your discernment to find strategies to strengthen that ability. One of the primary strategies is learning not to focus on the difficulty but to find ways of encouraging yourself, giving yourself energy. This is closely related to relinquishment and renunciation. You learn how to see the areas, the advantages of enduring. The mind becomes stronger, it can live in more difficult situations. It's not such a slave to its desires as it was before. There's a freedom that comes with endurance.

And equanimity, too, is something you have to will—the ability to stay unperturbed with the things you like and the things you don't like; not getting excited when things go well, not getting depressed when they don't. In other words, you train yourself to have a certain amount of independence. Discernment is needed to perfect and understand this quality, and the equanimity helps foster the discernment, allowing you to see things more clearly, as well. The two qualities go hand-in-hand. There are times in the meditation where you do simply have to sit and watch. Some of your defilements really will go away just when you watch them—but not all of them. One of the points of developing equanimity is so you begin to see where the difference lies.

So the Buddha is not recommending a blanket passivity here. He's telling you to develop equanimity when it's appropriate. You develop equanimity when you need to see things that you don't yet understand. When you understand, sometimes equanimity is still appropriate, and sometimes you need to do something more forceful to deal with the problem at hand.

All of these are things we have to will if we want to make progress on the path. The *if* there is important. We're free to will these qualities, we're free not to. This is why the Buddha never talked about Buddha nature, the idea that somehow our inherent nature is going to lead us to awakening. We do have freedom though, the freedom to choose. And the Buddha was a great respecter of that freedom. It's a little scary to think about the fact that awakening is not inevitable, for it's so easy to fall off the path. Sometimes the idea of inevitable awakening is much more reassuring—but it will make us complacent, which is precisely the quality that will lead us astray. We need to develop the heedfulness that comes when we realize that we are free to choose, that we can make right choices and wrong choices, and that we have to live with the consequences. This

is why the Buddha said that heedfulness is what lies at the basis of all that is skillful. So try to develop that and learn how to live with that and not get scared by it; learn how to make it energizing, so that it keeps you alert while at the same time developing the sense of patience and equanimity, the calm that protects the effort of the path so that it doesn't get you all frazzled and worn out.

So these are the qualities that we will on the path. These are the qualities that lead to awakening. If we learn how to respect our freedom, then that puts us on the path so that we understand what's going on. Ultimately, of course, all of these qualities will bring us to something that's not willed at all, but we're not going to really see it, we're not going to be able to test it and understand what's willed and what's not willed until we learn to understand our will very thoroughly—how far it goes, what subtle levels of willing can happen in the mind. In other words, we have to push the envelope of our will.

So ultimately this truth of the will does finally lead to something totally unwilled. This is one of the paradoxes of the teaching, but one that the Buddha is very upfront about—you're looking for something unfabricated, but you have to fabricate the path. As he said, the highest of all fabrications—which is another word for the highest of all things you can will—is the noble eightfold path. There is a dhamma higher than that—totally unwilled—which is dispassion, the rest that comes when you've succeeded in putting in the energy that's needed to will the path in a skillful way.

What this means is that the choice is up to us—which path we're going to follow—for there are many paths. There is a path that leads to hell. There's a path that leads to the animal rebirth. There is a path that leads to the human rebirth, and divine birth, and there is a path that leads to total awakening. The Buddha set them all out. But it's up to us to choose.