

# Taking Charge

July 21, 2009

The passage we chanted last night: *Atano loko*, the world offers no shelter. *Anabhissaro*, there is no one in charge. When you think about it in one way it's scary. There is no greater power that you can turn everything over to. There's no guarantee that everything is going to come out all right in the end. That's the scary interpretation. The other interpretation sees this as an opportunity: You're free to choose. You are free to write the story of your own life because there is nobody up there taking down the narrative from their point of view. You can write the story of your life right now. You can write one little bit of it right now. But sometimes that little bit can be very important. It can change the whole plot.

If you look back at your past, there are many actions that point in different directions. The story could head off in all kinds of directions from here. And so with each choice, you're deciding which parts of your past are relevant, which parts get stitched into the overall story, and which parts are just extra bits and pieces left over. So what do you want? What kind of life do you want? Now unfortunately, not everything is totally there for you to make up. There are certain givens in your life. Some things you can't change. And there's also simply the fact of action, the fact of cause and effect. If you want a good life, you have to create the causes for the good life. If you want happiness, you have to create the causes for happiness. It's up to you. As always, freedom entails responsibility.

So it's important, as you contemplate your path that you fully appreciate both sides, both the freedom and the responsibility. Sometimes we underestimate the freedom. We see that our lives have followed certain patterns and we just kind of let them go into the same old ruts over and over again, regardless of where those ruts are going to lead. We don't appreciate the freedom of choice we have to choose our identity. Every time the mind takes on an identity, that identity is already ready to fall apart, which means that if you've been taking on unskillful identities, you don't have to stick with them. You can change.

The thing about change here, though, is that it depends on your actions. This is where the responsibility comes in. You have to be responsible. You have to be totally honest with yourself about what your intentions are, so that you recognize an unskillful one when it comes up. You recognize a skillful one when it comes up. And then do your best to strengthen the skillful ones, weaken the unskillful ones.

As the Buddha often said, the things you keep thinking about form the inclination of the mind. And so as with any new habit, it takes a while to get used to the new habit. But you can lay down these new patterns in your brain, you can lay down these new patterns in your actions.

So you should ask yourself, what kind of life do you want? And then what choices does that kind of life require right now? If you're honest with yourself, you want a life of true happiness, a life that harms nobody. That requires that you develop a lot of qualities in the mind: mindfulness, alertness, compassion, goodwill, discernment, concentration, conviction in the principle of action. These are going to be related in one way or another to what are called the five

strengths. For to move your life in the direction you want it to requires strength, especially if you're having to change directions.

So you need to have conviction in the principle of action, that your actions really do make a difference. When the Buddha talks about knowing yourself, it's largely knowing your actions. Because your actions are the results of choices that come and go, you can change yourself through changes in your actions. And these changes are important. The choices you make are important. You need to have conviction in that principle. If you're not convinced of the importance of your actions, your actions start getting careless. So keep reminding yourself: You're the one in charge. If there's nobody else in charge, you can take charge. And you actually are taking charge each time you make a choice. So you can't abdicate your responsibility, saying, "Somebody else told me to do this. I am just following orders." The fact that you choose to follow orders is your karma right there. So you need conviction in the principle that your actions are important, and you can change them. It may take time. It may take effort. But they can be changed.

The next strength is persistence. You really stick with this. Once you've decided that a certain quality needs to be developed in your mind, you stick with it. You do whatever needs to be done. If you need to work on concentration, just keep coming back, coming back, coming back to the breath. If you find that certain defilements are getting in the way, you have to work on them, figure out ways to think around them so you don't constantly follow their song, their voices. So regardless of the quality that needs to be developed in the mind, or whichever one you're focusing on, you've got to keep coming back, coming back, coming back, to make sure that it's strong, that it really has become a new habit, a new skill.

This requires mindfulness, keeping in mind what you've got to do. Mindfulness is always paired with alertness, watching what you're actually doing to see if it does fall in line. This is where the principle of honesty comes in, because there is nobody up there to whom we can turn to give us the final word on what's right and wrong. We have to be really honest with ourselves. When I do X what are the results? Do they cause harm, do they not cause harm? Look very, very carefully. This is why, when the Buddha taught Rahula this principle, he first started with the principle of truthfulness. If you're not truthful, he says, there's no quality of a practitioner in you. It's been turned upside down, thrown away. It's empty and hollow. Your own honesty is your one authority, your one refuge.

So you keep in mind what you've got to do and then you keep checking your actions to make sure that they fall in line with that. This is a process that gets more and more subtle as it develops. The duty here is not something imposed from without. When the Buddha talks about duties, the only duties he really describes as universal are the duties appropriate to the Four Noble Truths. He doesn't impose them on you, but once you've decided that you want to put an end to suffering, you've taken on those duties yourself. You want to comprehend the suffering and abandon its cause. So wherever you look in your mind, wherever you look in your actions, make sure that you're following in line with these duties, trying to develop the path. If you find yourself wandering off, okay, more persistent effort is required.

And as your effort gets more and more skillful, it moves into right concentration. This is the culmination of your effort to renounce sensuality, to renounce ill will, to renounce harmfulness. When it's really resolved on those things, where else will the mind go but into good concentration? Then as the mind is really concentrated, it's able to be secluded from unskillful mental states. And when unskillful mental states come back, you can see them clearly. This is how concentration fosters discernment.

And, in turn, the discernment fosters your concentration. You begin to notice that the way the mind is concentrated is not as effortless as it could be, it's not as refined, it's not as solid as it could be. You work on adjusting those causes, adjusting your choices: where you focus, how you focus, how you manipulate the object, like the breath, to get the mind to settle down further. When you know that you've reached the point where you don't need to manipulate it any more, that you can just be with the breath: All of this requires discernment.

So if you look carefully at all five of these strengths, you realize that they're very much interconnected. It's not just 1-2-3-4-5 bingo! Discernment comes back and helps your effort. After all, you need to have some knowledge of what's skillful and not for your right effort to be right on course. Discernment helps your conviction, so that it doesn't go running off into strange ways. The image the Buddha gives is of building a house. You put the rafters up to support the main roof beam, but only when the main roof beam is in place are the rafters solid too. So discernment builds on the other strengths and then it turns around to make those strengths even stronger by ensuring that they really do work together.

So if you're going to be responsible, if you're going to have freedom, you need strength. The strength to make the right decision, the strength to keep on making the right decisions.

When you think about that passage, that there's no one in charge, what it means is that here's your opportunity to take charge in your life. It carries responsibilities. You have to be honest. But it also brings a lot of freedom. On a very deep level, there's nobody out there you have to please. You act kindly because it's your choice. You're generous because it's your choice. You're virtuous, you meditate, because it's your choice.

So take full advantage of your freedom. Really appreciate the fact that we are free to choose, and that that freedom can lead to a freedom going beyond simply the freedom to choose. Absolute freedom, absolutely unlimited: That's the happiness the Buddha promises. But you can find it only if you take charge.