

Keep Your Options Open

November 27, 2019

As we practice, we're exploring possibilities—trying to expand our range of possibilities. When you look at the Buddha's quest for awakening, you see that he tried out many paths, but there were some paths he didn't try because he saw that those would actually close down possibilities.

One was the path of saying that everything you did was preordained, you had no choices, so you simply had to accept what came. That's not a path you can experiment with, and that's not a path you can explore. It closes off lots of possibilities, so that's a path he didn't take.

Another assumption that he didn't try was that we can't observe ourselves, we have to depend on somebody else to do all the observing for us. The whole principle of how he practiced was to look at his own actions and—if they weren't getting the results he wanted—to see what might be changed. Which assumes of course, that we can observe our own actions.

This is why he said later on that the mind is luminous. That statement is sometimes interpreted to mean that the mind is innately pure, innately awakened. But in context, it doesn't mean that. He says, "It's because the mind is luminous that we can develop it." In other words, it can watch itself: A thought comes through the mind and you can watch the thought. It gives results, you can watch the results. You can see the connections.

So those are some of the assumptions we make as we decide that we're going to explore possibilities so that we to expand them. This is what the four noble truths are all about: They expand our sense of what's possible.

That third noble truth, saying that the total end of suffering is possible: Some of the other teachings that were being taught in the Buddha's time would say, "Suffering will end, but there's nothing you can do about it, you can't speed up the process"—a very fatalistic teaching. Others were saying, "You do have choices, but your choices can't get you to anyplace that's totally unconditioned, because after all, actions are conditions."

So in the third and fourth noble truths, the Buddha was saying something radical: There is an unconditioned happiness, and there's something you can do to get there. That required a new view of causality, which is one of the reasons why the Buddha took principles of causality so seriously.

His was a principle of causality that allowed for developing skills. In other words, there are some things that come in from the past: results of past actions that come into the present moment. And then there are choices you make in the present moment that don't have to be shaped by those past actions, and those give results now and into the future. So, there is a pattern that you can learn, but at the same time you do have freedom of choice.

When the Buddha expressed his awakening in the shortest terms, it was that principle of causality. And the few times when he went out to, you might say, pick fights with other teachers, to criticize them, to search them out to criticize them, it was all over issues of causality. Because a principle that allows for skillfulness is an important principle to hold to. You can develop skills, and you will develop as a person. And the more skills you have, if they really are skillful, then the more options you have for yourself. But a view of causality that doesn't allow for the development of skills closes all the doors. That's why the Buddha took causality so seriously.

So right now we're working on concentration, we're working on expanding our options, expanding our possibilities, keeping in mind the connection between the practice of concentration and the rest of the path, and the relationship between the path and the end of suffering.

Part of the experience of being on the path, on the one hand, is to create concentration as an alternative to other forms of pleasure. A lot of insight lies in seeing that certain things are worth doing, and certain things are not worth doing. And your idea of what's worth doing is going to depend on your range of skills.

Think about little children before they can speak: They just make nonsense syllables, and for them that's worth doing. But when they finally get the hang of language, then there's not much use for nonsense syllables anymore. Think of the games you played as a child that were a good exercise for the body. As the body grew and developed more abilities, all of a sudden those very childish games were no longer worth doing—your range had expanded, you had a better idea of what's worth doing and what's not.

In the same way, the pleasure that comes from concentration is one of those things that allows us to see that it is possible to find happiness that doesn't have to depend on sensuality—there is this option. And when you take this option seriously and actually develop it, that's when you can look back on your old sensual pleasures and get a much better perspective on them. A lot of the things that you used to pursue don't seem worth pursuing anymore. The friends you had that used to pursue those things with you: You begin to wonder—what was that friendship all about?

And for quite a while, the practice of concentration will seem very satisfactory. I remember when I was first teaching here in California, we had a weekend devoted to the four noble truths. We got to the third noble truth first, and then the fourth noble truth. People were saying that the third noble truth—dispassion, cessation—didn't seem all that attractive, but the fourth noble truth, especially right concentration, with the rapture and bliss: That was very attractive.

So you develop what's attractive until you begin to see its limitations. This is why knowledge of the third noble truth is so useful, so important: to remind you that no matter how good the concentration gets, there is something better. When you're ready to see the

drawbacks of concentration, ready to admit the limitations, you don't have to be stuck. There is an opening to something better there.

So work on your concentration, expand your range. And this will expand your sense of what is possible—and also expand your range of yourself. Because with every skill that you develop, you create a new self to go along with the skill.

I've read a couple of pieces, some even written by monks, saying, "If you actually work on concentration, it's going to require a sense of self. After all, you have to make an effort, and you have to think about how you're going to benefit from this in the future. And you have to have a sense of you as a person capable of doing this, all of which creates a lot of you's, lots of selves. But we all know that the teaching is about getting rid of our sense of self, so don't try to create any concentration, just learn how to be satisfied with what you've got, and there won't be any self around that." That's what one monk said.

But that's just keeping your range of options very narrow, and within that very narrow range you're going to be deciding what's worth doing, what's not worth doing, and the choices are going to be pretty limited. Your old lazy selves that take over—a lot of lazy selves can develop around telling yourself to be satisfied with what you've got.

So, yes, we are creating new selves as we practice concentration, but they're good selves to add to your inner committee, and they change the balance of power, tipping it in the right direction. Then, as the skill gets more and more mastered, those senses of self can fade into the background as you get focused on the skill in and of itself.

As you get more sensitive to what the mind is doing to create this state of concentration, you begin to see that it really is fabricated, it really is put together. And there will come a point where you're ready to see the drawbacks of the fact that it is fabricated. And the mind will develop naturally at that point.

It develops because you push it. In other words, you're not just letting it grow every old which-way. It's like a tree: You take a tree and you make a bonsai out of it, and it looks pretty unnatural, but it's the tree's natural reaction to a certain kind of training. In the same way, getting the mind into concentration is the mind's natural reaction to the training.

And when you begin to see the limitations to the concentration itself, and realize you don't want to go back to your old pre-concentration days, you start looking around: What other options are there? When you see the option of something unfabricated, you'll naturally want to go there.

Now, that option wouldn't have opened up without a lot of training. But the desire to go for it is the mind's natural reaction to the training: That's why there's such an intimate relationship between the third and the fourth noble truths. That third truth is there to remind you of this possibility.

Some people say, "Why did the Buddha put the third noble truth, the end of suffering, prior to the path to the end?" It's like a doctor's diagnosis: The doctor describes the

symptoms, tells you where the symptoms come from, and then tells you whether it is possible or not to cure the disease—by treating the cause. Once the doctor has established that possibility, then there's the path—the treatment.

Now, as we're meditating, we're not focusing on nibbana. If you're practicing jhana, you're not even focusing on jhana, you're focusing on your breath, but you're focusing on the breath not for its own sake—it's for the sake of the concentration, and you're developing the concentration for the sake of something unfabricated.

Always keep that perspective in the back of your mind, that range of possibilities. Don't close off possibilities for yourself. Always do your best to keep your options open.