

Self-Determination

June 28, 2020

There's a theme in several of Ajaan Lee's Dhamma talks where he says we have a choice: We can be slaves to our defilements or we can be slaves to the Buddha. When we're slaves to our defilements, there's no chance for freedom. We may think we're doing what we want, but it's usually what our defilements want, and they don't have our well-being in mind at all. They tend to go for the quick fix, the easy pleasures, with no thought for the long term.

As for being a slave to the Buddha, that's one of those situations where you can buy yourself out of slavery. In fact, everything he has you do is for the purpose of giving you your freedom. You practice generosity, you practice virtue, and especially you practice meditation, developing qualities of the mind where you take charge of your own mind for the sake of your long-term welfare and happiness.

It's one of those rare cases where you really do get to practice self-determination. Or in the Buddha's terms, you direct yourself rightly. You choose your direction. Whatever the hardships entailed, you're willing to take them on because you see the goal as something really worthy. And the path is a worthy path, too. The Buddha doesn't ask you to do anything that's shameful or dishonorable—unlike your defilements, which have no sense of shame at all. They get you to do all kinds of things, and then the rewards they give you are meager and paltry. So it's your choice, and it *really* is your choice. This is one of those areas where you define yourself in making the choice.

You may have heard of William James, an American philosopher. When he was young, he had a real crisis. He wanted to be an artist and his father said No—and said No so thoroughly that there was no way that James could wiggle out of it. He got into a severe depression and he began to wonder if he had free will, if *anybody* had free will. Then he came to realize, "I can choose to think one thought rather than another thought." He began to realize that free will is not something that's given to you, it's something you have to assert. The potential is there, but you have to assert it. So his first assertion for free will was, "I'm going to assume free will, and I'm going to think the thoughts I want to think." That was how he got out of his depression.

Now, society all around us doesn't encourage us in this direction, to find real freedom. Because everybody else in society is enslaved in one way or another. As Ajaan Mun said, unless it's the culture of the noble ones, every culture is based on defilement, and every culture based on defilement is a culture of slavery—and the slaves resent other people who are setting themselves free. The whole society is designed around taking advantage of defilements: They have their defilements, you have your defilements. And as long as you stay in there, everybody in the society seems to be okay—at least that's their attitude.

But you look at yourself: Is this really what you want out of life? Just birth, aging, illness and death? Are you satisfied with what the Buddha calls the ignoble search, where you're subject to birth, aging, illness, and death, and you look for happiness in things that are subject to birth, aging, illness, and death? Nothing of any solid value comes from that kind of life.

What defined the Buddha as a person was his decision to go for something that didn't die. Otherwise, he would have been just one more prince in India who would have been totally forgotten by now, and who knows if anybody else would have found the way? But the way is there. It wasn't where the Buddha expected it, but he was able to find it. He opened it up.

In his image, it's as if someone had found an old road that had been overgrown because nobody had followed it for so long. He followed his way along the road and he found the ruins of an old city, a city that could be made populous again. So he opened up the road, and here it is, available to us. You define yourself by your choice of whether you're going to follow it or not. It can be your first assertion of freedom.

Of course, this freedom of choice is not the freedom of nibbana. The question sometimes comes up, "The fact that we have freedom of choice, is that our first taste of nibbana?" No, it's not. The freedom of nibbana is totally unconditioned, whereas this freedom is a conditioned one. But the more you make skillful choices exercising your freedom of choice, the more you expand it. And as you make the most of your freedom of choice, right next to that is where you're going to find something that's of even more value and has even more freedom. It is there.

As you're just getting started on the path, it's a working hypothesis, but as you follow it through, you see that there really is something unconditioned that can be touched in the mind right in the present moment. It's not the present moment but it's right next to the present moment. It's the ending of kamma, but you do actions—in other words, you create kamma—to get there, the kamma of the noble path. Then every step you take on the path is an assertion of your freedom of choice. It's a step of self-determination.

You define yourself by the choices you make. This is how you develop a really healthy sense of self. Eventually, you'll find that you won't need that sense of self at the end of the path, because your sense of self is a strategy, a strategy for finding happiness. And as you walk along the path you get a better idea of what happiness is, so the strategies are going to change, so *you're* going to change.

So when we say that this is a path of self-determination, it has two meanings. One in the classical sense of self-determination, in other words, you get to make your own choices. You determine your direction yourself. And two, in making your choices, you determine what you are, and you can keep on improving what you are as you make better and better choices. But the choice is yours.

As I said, society doesn't encourage you. You may think that living in the West we have a special burden because our families don't agree with the values we're following here. Well, it's

the same in Thailand and other Buddhist countries. People are okay with their children practicing the Dhamma up to the extent of practicing for the sake of a better rebirth, practicing to make merit to dedicate to the parents, say, after they die—but not really practicing for the sake of freedom. If the children start meditating, the parents start getting worried. As Ajaan Fuang says, it disturbs them. They've stayed in their slavery all along, and maybe part of them resents the freedom of other people who don't want to stay in slavery and who are open to the possibility that we could get out of our slavery.

So it's up to you to decide whether you want that kind of thinking to hold you back. It's held you back for a *long* time, but you have the freedom to say, "I want something different; I want something better." You can determine on that, and follow through with that determination. At the very least, you will have given the Buddha's challenge a try. Because that's what his teachings are: They're a challenge. They're basically saying, "You there in the world! You there in the prison of the world! You can get out! It's going to require effort but you can get out!" The prison wardens may be there to try to hold you back, but unlike a regular prison break, you don't have to be sneaky. You want to make the kind of decisions—and you *will* be making the kind of decisions—that you're happy to make in the full light of day, living a life, as the texts say, as clean as a polished shell.

So that's the choice that's available to you, and it's up to you to take advantage of it or not.