

## *Free to Choose*

*July 3, 2016*

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Try to stay with each breath as it comes in, as it goes out. Try to see what kind of breathing feels good for the body right now. Does long breathing feel good? Or short breathing? Heavy? Light? Shallow? Deep? Fast? Slow? You get to choose.

You're perfectly free right now. You could think about anything you wanted to, but if you want to get the mind under some control, if you want to have control over your life, you've got to get the mind on one object and learn how to keep it on one object. When you have it on that one object, then you're freeing yourself from a lot of unskillful things that are going on in the mind.

The Buddha's teachings are all about freedom, how we can be free from our defilements. The teachings he gives are all about how to do that. Generosity teaches you how to free yourself from your stinginess. Virtue teaches you how to be free from impulses that are going to be harmful. Meditation teaches you how you can free yourself from the suffering the mind ordinarily creates for itself.

One of the ironies in life is that nobody's forcing us to suffer, yet we all suffer from our own actions. The things we do, the things we say, the things we think about can bring a lot of suffering on us—and yet we keep doing it. Nobody's forcing us. The Buddha's saying you're free not to do that.

You also have the right not to suffer. I don't think there's any other religion where they say that you totally have the right to do what you want with your life. Other religions say there's somebody who created the world and the person who created the world has the right to tell you what to do, while you have to follow in line with that. Your desire for happiness has to take second or third place.

But in the Buddha's teaching, your desire for happiness takes first place. There's no plan out there, there's no one being who created the world. We create our lives through our own actions, and our actions are things that we're free to choose.

So why are we still suffering? It's because of a lack of understanding, a lack of knowledge. We can develop that knowledge through the practice. As we practice generosity, we learn what it's like to have a more spacious mind, to overcome our impulses to be stingy. To practice virtue frees us from all the defilements that would cause us to harm ourselves. To practice meditation frees us from all the internal delusions that make us suffer.

So this is where real freedom is found. It's not found out there in constitutions and bills of rights. It's found in the fact that the mind doesn't have to be a slave to

its own defilements. Nobody else forces you to behave in an unskillful way. They may give you inducements to behave in an unskillful way, but you don't have to give into them. You have to remember that the really important things in life are the qualities that you develop in the mind, because they're the things that lead to real freedom.

So when the choice sometimes comes where they want you to lie or steal or do something that's unfair and dishonest, remember that you have the freedom not to give in. You may have to suffer a little bit in the short term, but in the long term the benefits are really great.

And you're free to make these choices. The Buddha never forced his teachings on anybody. He says if you want to find happiness, this is how it's done. This is the way the world works. This is what needs to be done in order to find happiness. But the choice is yours. If you want happiness, this is what you do. If you don't care, you can go someplace else. Nobody's forcing you.

So always keep that in mind. The fact that you're suffering: Nobody forces you to suffer. It's your own lack of skill. But you can develop the skills that can get past suffering: through generosity, through virtue, through the meditation. These are the choices that lead to real freedom.