

Imagining Freedom

May 12, 2009

Some of us are heading off for a camping trip next week. And the issue when you prepare for a camping trip is always how much to take along. If you don't take enough, you're going to put yourself through hardships. If you take too much, you're going to limit your range, how far you can go, because you weigh yourself down. So you have to weigh these two sides against each other. And that's the way it is with most of our activities in life. We have to make compromises. We're never totally free.

One of my students was once going to stay outside of Zion Park. He was hoping to stay for quite a while, but he talked with one of the rangers there, who said, "You know, you can't eat the scenery. You've got to think about the practicalities." That's what always ties us down. Any thought of total freedom always gets dragged down to earth by the fact that we have to eat, we need certain comforts just to keep going. And most people accept that as just the way things have to be. They don't think outside the box.

The Buddha however, thought outside the box. What if there could be a happiness that wasn't tied down to anything, that wasn't restricted by anything, totally unlimited, totally free? What would that be like? How would you find it? As the traditional stories tell us, all of his friends and family said, "No, it's impossible. Don't even think of it." But he had the courage to give it a try. He ended up finding it in a way that he didn't expect. And the freedom itself was something that lay beyond the imagination.

When the Buddha talks about nibbana, the word "nibbana" itself is an analogy. It's just an image—of a fire going out—which for most of us seems to indicate going out of existence. But that's not what the image meant in the Buddha's time. The theory was that there was a fire element present in all things. When it wasn't burning, it was calm and unlimited, indescribable, something you couldn't locate. When it was burning, you could locate it and describe it: It was agitated, clinging and bound to its fuel. So when the Buddha used the word "nibbana" to describe the happiness he had found, the implication was that it was totally free—free from clinging, free from any kind of limitation.

People used to ask him to describe it further: Do you exist in that state? Do you not exist? Are you conscious? Are you not conscious? He said that it's totally undecidable. Again, he used the image of fire. He said when the fire goes out, does it go East? West? North? South? Well, it doesn't apply. In the same way, in

our normal imagination of what nibbana might be, we try to put it into words, put it into our concepts. And in almost every case, the Buddha said, it doesn't apply, it doesn't apply. The one word that he uses without any qualification is freedom, liberation, release. Some cases he calls it the ultimate happiness, but even there, he says, the mind at that point is beyond our normal sense of pleasure and pain.

He does describe it as a kind of awareness: awareness without feature, awareness without surface. In other words, it's not an awareness with an object. It doesn't even take itself as its object. And it's not known through our normal six senses. He also says that you touch liberation with the body, which means that it's a total experience. In one case, he even says that you see it with the body, which I think was meant to scramble up our normal ideas of what things we know through the senses. But it defies the imagination.

For many people, that just puts a stop to thinking about it and they lose interest. But other people find it a challenge: "What if it were possible to find a happiness that's totally free from limitation? Why don't I give it a try?" What if you could live without the limitations that we tend to take for granted, the ways we sell ourselves short? It means putting a lot on the line, which is one of the reasons some people shrink away from it.

But fortunately, the path doesn't save all of its pleasures for the end. There are difficulties, but many times what look like difficulties turn out to be liberating. When I was first ordained, the part about being a monk that I found least attractive was all the rules I had to follow. But as I got to live within the framework of the rules, I found they were liberating in a lot of ways. The rules enable you to live a life where you don't have to worry about tomorrow's meal, where your time isn't filled up with lots of activities. You've got lots of time to look at your own mind, to train your own mind. And it's made possible by the rules.

And as we meditate, we're going to have to deal with pain. But you learn how to sit with the pain. It's inevitable. Even when your posture is perfect, there are going to come times when there's pain in the meditation. You finally decide that "Instead of running away from it, let's just turn around and look at it." It's like that character in the novel, *The Wizard of Earthsea*. For most of the novel, he's running away, running away from this very shadowy, threatening figure. But he finally decides, "Okay, I can't keep on running like this. Even if it's going to kill me, I've got to turn around and face it." And in facing it, he overcomes it. Then he's free from the shadow that's been tormenting him.

And it's the same with pain. You learn to sit with it for a while and put the mind in as steady a state as possible. This is why we work with the breath to give us a sense of ease and comfort, a feeling that we belong in our own skin, we belong in our bodies. We know that we have a safe place to go. Then you can turn around and look at the pain and not be afraid of it. You don't have to run away from it anymore. You begin to see that it was like that shadow. It was amorphous and ill-defined, which is why you were afraid of it. But once you can actually look at it, once you can comprehend it, you can start asking questions about it: Where is the pain the worst? What shape does it have? How do I picture it to myself? How does that picturing it make the pain worse? Why is it that physical pain makes inroads into the mind?

This is one of those things we take for granted—that the mind has to be pained by physical pain—but it doesn't have to happen. We realize that the way we label the pain, the way we perceive it, makes it a burden on the mind. But if we can learn how to drop those labels, watch the mind as it's dealing with the pain and see where the labels make the pain worse and then drop those labels, we find that we can be with the pain and not feel threatened by it. We don't have to keep running from it. When we turn around and face it, we find that it's not nearly as fearsome as we thought it was.

So there are parts of the path that at the beginning look daunting, but we're looking at them from the wrong side. We're looking at the inside walls of our prison and we're afraid to challenge them. We're afraid to go beyond them, thinking that outside of the prison is scary, because the walls themselves are so scary. But when you get on the other side, you find that it was worth whatever effort it took to get through the walls.

In our imagination of nibbana—because the person there can't be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither—it seems like a big blank. But nibbana itself is not a blank. It's just that our mind goes blank trying to think about it because the Buddha thwarts all of our efforts to think about it. He mentions in one of the suttas a state of concentration which is literally mindless, with no awareness, no consciousness, nothing at all. And he states very clearly that that's not the goal.

He does mention twice that there is a kind of consciousness in nibbana, but it's not the kind of consciousness that we know in our world of the six senses. He mentions it only twice, but then again there are lots of important teachings that he mentions only once or twice. He defines kamma as intention only once in the Canon. His definition of sensuality occurs only once in the Canon. His definition of the world occurs only twice. His definition of the two kinds of nibbana, the

nibbana experienced while you're alive, and the nibbana experienced at death: That occurs only once. It doesn't mean, simply because the occurrences are so few, that these are unimportant teachings. It's just that trying to imagine nibbana is not the path. If we get too tied up in our efforts to imagine it, we get deflected from what we're supposed to do, which is to focus on developing the path. That's only that way that the goal can be experienced.

But it is useful every now and then to try to stretch your imagination: There is a happiness that's not limited in any of the ways that we're familiar with and any of the ways we've learned how to accept limitations on our well-being.

Ajaan Maha Boowa makes a comparison with being in prison. Some people decide, "Okay, prison food is good enough, I guess. It keeps me alive. I'm not going to think about food outside the prison, and what life is like outside the prison." There are some teachers who say that nibbana is simply learning how to be equanimous about the way things are. Well, that's learning how to accept life in the prison.

So it's good every now and then to stretch your imagination. Maybe it is possible to find ultimate, true, total, unlimited freedom. And as we hold that possibility in mind, we should take a look at our lives. How are we living our lives? What are the things that make us willing to sell ourselves short, to say, "I'd rather stay in the prison, put up with the walls, allow myself to be chased around by pain, afraid to turn around and look at it, afraid to question many of the things that I've accepted."

When you look at the Buddha's life, the stories he tells about what he had to do in order to ultimately get to awakening, you realize that often he advanced in his quest by stopping and asking himself a question: Why do I put up with *x*? Why do I look for my happiness in things that are going to die, grow ill, age, turn into something aside from happiness? Why do I allow myself to be governed by pain? Why do I allow myself to be governed by fear? Why don't I look into which of my thoughts are skillful and which ones are not? These are the questions he would pose to himself, the kinds of question where you suddenly stop and look at something you've been taking for granted for so long.

All too often, we accept that things have just got to be the way they already are and there's no way around them, so we might as well not even think about them. Well, he would stop and think about them: Why does this have to be this way? What if it weren't necessary? What if I didn't have to be afraid of pain? What if I didn't have to be governed by fear? What if I could step outside my thoughts?

It was in asking those questions that the Buddha could expand his imagination, so should be an important part of our practice that we, too, ask

questions that expand our imagination, our sense of what's possible. Even if we don't get all the way to the goal in this lifetime, at least we've expanded our minds. We've learned to find a greater measure of freedom as we're on the path, as we learn not to take those prison walls for granted and to develop a sense that our life can reach the other side.