

The Challenge of Faith

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The story goes that after the Buddha's awakening, after he'd been experiencing the bliss of release for seven weeks, he thought about the prospect of teaching what he had learned to other people. At first he was discouraged because what he had learned was very subtle—things like dependent co-arising and the principle of this-that conditionality. He thought it would be impossible to teach anybody what he had learned because he had been through an awful lot, of course. He was wondering how many other people would be willing to go through all that.

That's when a Brahma came down and begged him to teach, saying that there were people with little dust in their eyes and they would benefit from hearing the Dharma. So the Buddha surveyed the world again, and he saw that, yes, it was true, there would be people who'd benefit. And so he decided to teach. He ended by saying, "Open are the doors to the deathless. Let those with ears put forth their conviction."

So we have ears. But what about our conviction? Hearing the possibility that there is a deathless happiness, a happiness that you don't have to create, a happiness that you don't have to protect once you've found it, because it is just there, it's totally beyond the touch of any conditions: Acting on that possibility requires conviction. One, conviction that it *is* a possibility. And two, conviction that it's worth the effort to explore that possibility. The path there is not necessarily an easy path. It requires persistence, patience, resolution, ardency. As Ajaan Fuang once said—and it's a pun in Thai—we have to do something just a little bit, but we have to keep at it consistently. And the keeping at it is the hard part, because the little bit is just being mindful, being alert. But the keeping at it means we have to protect that mindfulness, protect that alertness, because it's so easy to throw them away.

And that can be really hard because we have a lot of other agendas in our lives. Some agendas don't even like the idea that there might be a deathless happiness. To follow those agendas is to destroy ourselves, but we go ahead and destroy ourselves willingly because we see easy happiness all around us—the pleasures of having a family, the pleasures of having money, the pleasures of having a job—and we'd rather not look at the pain that comes with having a family, the pain that comes with having money, the pain that comes with having a job. We see at least that these pleasures are visible here and now. And for something we haven't yet seen, we're not willing to make the gamble, especially when we see that the path requires sacrifice.

You have to give up certain of your pleasures, but that's the way it is with the world. It's only the human potential movement that has told us that if we cultivate our potentials then we can have everything we want: beauty, wealth, power, a great spiritual life, a great sexual life, the whole shmeer. Part of us would really like that.

But if you ever look at people who've tried to excel in every area of their life, you find that it drives them crazy. It's a basic principle that some forms of happiness, some forms of pleasure, require that you give up other ones. So that's a given right there. The question is, what kind of happiness, what kind of pleasure are you going to take as your primary focus? What is something you're *not* going to sacrifice? How high do you want to set your sights? What possibilities for happiness do you want to take into consideration? We have the testimony of the Buddha, we have the testimony of his noble disciples, the monks and nuns, lay men and lay women, who put his teaching into practice and found that, yes, it worked. There really is a deathless happiness. As one of the Thai ajaans said, if they could take out and show that happiness to everybody else, nobody would want any other happiness in the world, especially any happiness that would get in the way of that true happiness.

But it's something that's experienced totally within the mind, within your awareness. As the Buddha said, it's something you touch with your body. It's not just an idea you have in the mind. It's a full experience. But until you've touched it, it's just words, ideas, somebody else's news. This is where you have to put forth your conviction, one, that it's possible that they've done that, and two, it's possible that you could do it, too.

Again, part of the mind wants that possibility, but part of it seems to be afraid of it, doesn't want to go near it. It's very easy to listen to people who tell you, "Oh, that kind of happiness is not really true, or maybe the Buddha was just having a weird psychological experience, and maybe he didn't really know what he was talking about. We can just go ahead and live our lives and try to satisfy ourselves with our sensual pleasures, our relationships, whatever, and simply accept the fact that someday we're going to have to die and that's it." And these are the same people who accuse *Buddhism* of being pessimistic.

But there's that part of us that really wants a true happiness, a happiness that's not going to turn around and bite us. I was reading a book a while back saying that part of growing up is realizing that you have to make compromises and have to settle for less than the best. And so in that sense, the Buddha never really grew up. He had a young person's sense of idealism that maybe we really could find a true happiness and maybe we can do it through our own efforts.

It's interesting that the very few times he seeks out teachers of other traditions to argue with them, one teaching he repeatedly takes on is the teaching of determinism, that everything you do or say or think or experience is based on what's already been done: either the will of a creator, or impersonal fate, or your own past actions, that these totally control what you are going to experience now. And he says if you hold to any of those beliefs, the idea of a path of practice for finding true happiness means nothing.

And it's strange that over the centuries, even within Buddhist circles, the Buddha's teachings on karma had been taken to be deterministic. But they're not. There's that element of freedom. When he said that this-that conditionality is subtle, I heard one Buddhist scholar saying, well, he's basically saying that causality happens. There are causes and effects of all kinds.

That was it. Well, that's not subtle at all. What's subtle is the fact that some of the things you experience are determined by your past actions but not everything. You have freedom in the present moment to shape the potentials coming in from the past. Where does that freedom come? That's a kind of a mystery. And how do you tell which influences are coming from the present and which from the future? That's what's really subtle, and that's what you want to explore.

When the Buddha lays out his most basic teachings, he starts with generosity. And he isn't just mouthing platitudes. The experience of generosity is probably one of your first tastes of freedom as a child: that point where you realized that you have something that you can give to somebody else, and nobody's forcing you to give it, but out of your own free will you decide to give it away. The same with the precepts. There are cases where you know you can get away with killing or stealing or illicit sex or lying or taking intoxicants, but you choose not to. You're not necessarily a slave of habit. And even though you can think of some immediate rewards that may come from breaking the precepts, you're able to say no. That right there is an experience of freedom, the ability to choose our actions.

In the beginning, you take it on conviction that this ability to choose really is free and it really can take you far. If you don't believe in that, what meaning is there to life? The Buddha said that the idea of a holy life would be impossible in a deterministic universe. But if you think a little bit further, the idea of *any* kind of meaning in life is impossible in a deterministic universe. We choose to act because we mean for our actions to have an effect. With no choice as to how to act, there's no meaning. The problem is that there's no way you can prove that the universe is or is not deterministic. This is why conviction is required.

When the Buddha talks about faith and conviction, he's not talking about having to believe in things that make no sense. We've experienced enough of that in Western religions, which is why many of us shiver at the idea of faith. But the Buddha is simply asking us to believe in something that makes sense but you can't yet prove, which is the method of any scientist. Scientists have to go on a dual hypothesis: one, that there are patterns or laws, as they call them, in the way the universe works, and two, that you have the freedom to design an experiment to test those laws. The upshot of the second part of the hypothesis is that when you design a experiment, it's your responsibility that you design a good experiment. If you design a bad experiment, you have to take responsibility for the fact that it was badly designed.

So even science has that paradox. On the one hand, believing in causal patterns but also believing in free will. Some scientific theories try to deny free will but the actual practice of science depends on believing in free will, the free will to design a good experiment.

What the Buddha's doing is taking that paradox and saying, "Let's explore and see how far it can take us in the pursuit of true happiness, the pursuit for finding an end to suffering." Our laboratory is right here in our body, our speech, and our mind, particularly as we get to know our intentions better and better.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate. We intend to get the mind still and to keep it here at the breath. A mind in concentration is actually taking one intention and learning how to hold onto it. This is a really good way of learning about intention, because when you try to hold onto one intention, you start seeing other intentions coming up that you otherwise wouldn't have seen. And you realize you have the choice as to which intention to follow.

So make this your experiment. See what happens if you stick with this one intention, just to stay stay stay with the breath. And then you have to use your discernment, one, to make the breath interesting so it's easier to stay, and then, two, if there are other intentions that come up that are really tempting you, you have to figure out ways around them and not fall for them.

So the discernment the Buddha is talking about is a pragmatic matter. It's not just knowing the definitions of the four noble truths or of the five aggregates or of any of the other terms the Buddha uses. It means knowing how to put them to use skillfully, being strategic in figuring out what's skillful and what's unskillful and how to talk yourself into doing the skillful thing that you might not want to do, or out of doing the unskillful thing that you might want to do. It's in all of this that you get to know your intentions better and better. The better you get to know your intentions, the closer you get to understanding what this freedom of choice is.

As you examine even your state of concentration, you find it can become more and more refined as you refine your intention, refine your awareness. And then you develop discernment in two ways. One is looking at ways that the mind would leave concentration to take up an object. What's motivating it? Why did it act on that intention to go out there? In other words, you're not looking so much at the object as you are looking at the process that wants to go to the object. The other way to develop discernment is to look at the intentions that are making up your state of concentration: To what extent do they place a burden on the mind? You can watch this, seeing the ups and downs of your concentration, the ups and downs of the level of stress in your concentration. That way you begin to detect very subtle movements of the mind that otherwise you wouldn't have seen, and peel away any of the motions of the mind that you can now see are obviously causing stress—or maybe not so obviously.

But when you can detect these things, along with the connection between a movement in your intention and the movement in the level of stress, you start peeling these things away until finally there's a moment where there's no intention. There's not even the intention not to have an intention. The intention just stops, because you realize there's no way any intention would not involve some level of fabrication and stress.

That's the point of genuine freedom. And that point of freedom is where everything opens up. As the Buddha said, that's where your conviction becomes verified, that there really is a deathless. The door has been opened. You've gone through the door. And from that point on, you again never doubt anything the Buddha says about the practice, because you know that it worked, has worked for you. Even though you may not have gone all the way, at least you've

had that taste, you've seen that glimpse. You realize that what was originally just words about a possibility has been realized. It really is possible.

But as you listen to this, it's still just news. It's up to you to decide whether you're going to put forth your conviction. But you look around at the alternatives: What other things would you like to be convinced of? Would you like to be convinced that human life is really nothing much, just people scrambling to feed themselves and clothe themselves and reproduce, so that more people can feed themselves and clothe themselves and keep on reproducing themselves, which gets pretty pointless: Is that what you want to be convinced of? Or do you want to be convinced that there is a possibility that you can find a deathless happiness and that you can do it through your own efforts, that you've got the potential.

The choice is yours.