

## *The Riddle of Freedom*

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The Buddha's teachings on karma are often presented as a form of determinism—fatalism even: What was done in the past is going to determine what you're going to experience in the present, and if you do something in the present moment, you have some hope that it will have an effect on the future. But there's that question: Well, do you really have choice in the present? If the present moment is shaped by the past, what can you do?

That would be a problem if the teaching were deterministic, but it's not. The Buddha makes it very clear that if you believe everything that you experience is shaped by past karma, you have no way of practicing. There's nothing you can do. You just have to accept what's coming.

There's even the question of whether you could legitimately say you had the choice of accepting or not. If everything were already shaped, then there could no directions as to what you should or shouldn't do, what's skillful and what's unskillful in the present moment. This, the Buddha said, leaves you bewildered. And that's precisely the same attitude that he says suffering leads you to: You're left bewildered. You don't know why it's happening. You don't know what to do.

So obviously, the Buddha's not teaching a deterministic or fatalistic explanation of karma. He makes it very clear. You do have freedom in the present moment to make choices. Now, that freedom may be restricted. It's a conditioned freedom. It may be restricted by the range of skills you have, and also by things you've done in the past, so that only certain options open to you right now. But one of the options open to you always is that you can choose to do the skillful thing.

Whether it's in terms of your thoughts, your words, or your deeds, there's always a skillful option. It may not be easiest option, it may require a lot of sacrifice, but the skillful option is always there. And as you choose the skillful option more and more, you're creating the conditions for greater and greater freedom.

In other words, you develop the skills for dealing with a difficult situation, figuring out how to do the skillful thing even if you don't enjoy doing it. Or if you enjoy doing the unskillful thing, you learn how to talk yourself out of that. And that's a skill: the ability to direct your mind in the right direction. As the Buddha said in the Mangala Sutta, "Having a self that is rightly directed is a great blessing."

So you learn how to direct your actions in the appropriate way. And you get more and more skills in dealing with the different temptations that come up. You hear the mind say, “Well, I’m too tired today,” or “I’m too...” whatever—too hot, too cold, too early, too late—whatever excuses the mind makes up for itself. Or there’s the excuse that “I’m just simply the way I am. This is the way I am, so I’m just going to act this way.” That belief in an innate nature, whether it’s good or bad, ends up making you irresponsible. The nature itself is what you fall back on without claiming any choice at all, which means that you’re not even aware of the choices you’re making. Or you deny them. This limits the range of your skills.

So in trying to develop the skillful choice every time, you’re expanding the range of your skills. That’s one way in which you find you have greater freedom.

Also, when you act in skillful ways, the karmic results are less restrictive. Think back in your life to a couple of times there where you had the choice between doing something really skillful and something really unskillful, and you chose the skillful alternative. It increased the range of possibilities in your life. If you had chosen the unskillful alternative, it would have shut down a lot of possibilities. This is how pursuing the path of skillfulness increases your range of freedom.

Now, in all of these cases, of course, we’re talking about conditioned freedom—relative freedom within space and time. But as you keep focusing on what you’re doing right now to see if it’s skillful or not, you’re getting closer and closer to what’s actually a mystery or a riddle in the Buddha’s teachings. Why *is* there this moment of freedom? What is it about the moment that allows you to make choices?

So you dig down there, here in the present moment at that particular spot where you’re able to make a choice, and you watch the process. What’s going on in your mind there? You learn a lot of really fascinating things about how the mind works: all the different levels of the committee members. And ultimately, you dig down to something that really is free: totally free in an unconditioned way.

This is how exercising your freedom increases it and gives you greater insight into the possibility of freedom: why it’s possible. Then, ultimately, you get to something that’s even more important than that: the fact that there is total freedom that’s unconditioned.

This is why you can say that the Buddha’s teachings are the pursuit of freedom through being skillful. You’re increasing your range of skills, learning how to deal with lust, with anger, with laziness, sleepiness, learning how to deal with pain—the fear we have around pain—learning how not to be intimidated by it.

All of these are important skills in the mind. How many of these are taught in our schools? Hardly any at all, but it really is an important part of our education that we learn these skills. If you don't learn them when you're young, learn them now. Remind yourself that this is the direction in which freedom lies.