

Why Limit Yourself?

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There's a famous American philosopher, William James, who, when he was a young man, had no idea of becoming a philosopher. He wanted to be an artist. But his father made it clear in no uncertain terms that this was not going to happen. After a long struggle with his father, James finally relented. Then he fell into a severe depression that lasted for many years.

What got him *out* of the depression was reading the work of a French philosopher who raised the question: Why believe in determinism when you could also believe in free will? Why believe in something that would place limitations on you?

So, William James decided that his first act of free will would be to believe in free will. From there, he went on to have a very successful career as a psychologist and a philosopher. In his philosophy, he kept raising that question, the question of free will, in response to people who believed in determinism.

He said that there are two types of truths in this world. There are truths of the observer, in other words things that you observe where you have to get your will out of the way—aside from the will to know—if you want to know their truth. There are certain things that you're not going to discover unless you get what you *want* to be true out of the way. An example would be the discovery of the orbits of the planets. For a long time, people wanted them to be circles, but they weren't circles. Then someone said, "Why don't we just look at them for what they are rather than what we want them to be?" That's when they discovered that they were ellipses.

As for the truths of the will, the second type of truth: Within the realm of what is possible, there are certain things that'll become true only if you want them to become true. You become a good piano player only if you want to become a good piano player; you become a good scientist only if you want to become a good scientist. So, in the realm of truths of the will, you have to ask yourself: Why would you want to believe in anything that will place unnecessary limitations on you?

The Buddha himself raises this question in one of the suttas. He says it's possible to believe that there is such a thing as an action and that actions do have results, or it's possible to believe that actions are not real or that they have no results. If you believe that they're not real or have no results, you're very unlikely to make the effort to do skillful things or act in skillful ways. You close off the possibility of learning how to benefit from skillful actions. So, it's wiser

to believe in the fact that there *is* action, action is real, and your actions *do* have consequences.

Similarly with the belief in the cessation of becoming, which is a synonym for the cessation of suffering, or for *nibbana*. If you don't believe that it's possible, you're not going to do anything to find it. But if you *do* believe it's possible, then you leave open the possibility that you might make the effort to find the cessation of becoming or nibbana. It's wiser to believe in something that opens possibilities rather than something that closes them off.

The Buddha's implication here is that you don't want to close off possibilities through your beliefs. This raises the question: Why would you want *not* to believe in these things? Why would you *not* want to believe in the four noble truths that suffering is clinging, it's caused by a craving, it can be ended by ending the craving, and there is a path of practice to follow? This is a set of beliefs that offers hope. If you don't want to believe in it, why?

You may have some history with beliefs: disappointed beliefs or past disappointments in general, where you wanted something and you just got stymied.

There's also the fear of unrewarded effort: What if it's not true? You put out the effort and it turns out to be effort in vain. Well, remember, nobody has ever proven the Buddha wrong on these points. The prospects that are opened by these points are surely desirable: a total end of suffering that can be attained through your efforts.

So, if you find yourself defeated by past disappointments, why *let* yourself be defeated here? Think of the young Buddha-to-be on his quest for awakening. He went down many false paths: the paths of some of the formless attainments, the path of self-torture. He put in a lot of effort each time, and each time he came up wanting. But he never let himself get discouraged. Each time he figured, "I must be doing something wrong. What can I change in my actions?" He never entertained the possibility that true happiness was not possible. He never let himself get discouraged. His desire for true happiness was that strong.

Think of what he said was a secret to his awakening. Actually, there were two secrets. One was an unwillingness to rest content with skillful qualities, and the other was relentless effort. In both these cases, it was a matter of the strength of his desire. He wouldn't let himself rest content even with the very subtle pleasures of formless attainments. As long as he saw there was something conditioned there, he realized that it couldn't be the solution to the problem. So he kept on looking, looking.

But it wasn't just strength of desire that got him through. There was also discernment, his ingenuity, figuring out new ways of approaching the problem when the old ways hadn't worked. He finally came to realize that looking at the desire in and of itself, looking at the intention in and of itself, was going to be a large part of the solution. So he started paying attention to his intentions. He was able to sort out what was skillful, and what was not. He finally arrived at awakening.

That attention to his intentions, he later taught as analysis of qualities, one of the factors for awakening. It's precisely the factor that brings an end to doubt, an end to the unwillingness to believe that there is a way out.

One of the other lessons he drew from all this, of course, was that in finding the path and in discovering what was lying in the way of the path, desire played a big role. There were the desires that got in the way and there was the desire that saw him through. This is why craving is one of the causes of suffering, but the desire of right effort is part of the path out. As he said, *all* things, *all* phenomena are rooted in desire.

So, the question becomes: How much do you want to believe in your ability to get awakening? You have to look into that desire. If you find that the desire is weak or discouraged, you have to learn to talk to yourself. Ask yourself: What are the alternatives? Just continued suffering on and on and on: Do you want that? Why would you want anything less than an unconditioned happiness?

Maybe one voice in the mind might say: How can a conditioned path find the unconditioned happiness? But the way the Buddha explained causality shows that through a complex process—in which some causes give rise to results immediately while others take time: When you put those two principles together, you get a very complex process. And that complex process does allow for causes to lead to the threshold of something uncaused. That, for the Buddha, was one of the truths of the observer. This is simply the way things work. This is the way causality works. And it does respond to skillful intentions and unskillful intentions.

It's because this is one of his truths of the observer, and probably one of the most important ones, that when he was asked to explain his awakening in the shortest terms, this was the answer he would give.

So, given that these are the truths of the observer—the Buddha as observer—you have to ask yourself: What now with the truths of your will? What do you truly want? And if it's anything less than the very best, why?