

The meaning of freedom

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In our culture, we prize freedom very highly, and so when we talk of freedom or liberation in Zen practice, it is very resonant for most people. And we tend to think of freedom in the ways our culture has defined it: having or doing whatever we want without any restriction, and having an infinite number of choices. So this fits perfectly with our consumer culture, whose ultimate expression is the “big box” store. With vast aisles stocked with every imaginable good, we can imagine that we will be able to choose just what we want. It is an individualistic and very naive understanding of freedom. The freedom to do whatever you will, and to choose whatever you want. We may even begin practice with this underlying idea, that we have chosen this path somehow in the midst of a bustling spiritual marketplace competing for our hearts and minds, so that we can *have* something: peace of mind, less anger, enlightenment. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t enter any spiritual practice with a confused idea of what it really is all about. We look for the right center, the right teacher, the right people to be in community with. And we continue to ask ourselves the two questions that gnaw at us in every aspect of our lives: Is this what I want? and Did I make the right choice?

Cognitive scientists are beginning to recognize that every choice carries a cost. Doctors, judges, and pilots, for example, make thousands of choices, large and small, every day. The quality of those choices wanes over the course of the day, as cognitive systems simply become exhausted. It’s alarming! Our brains become fatigued, and we begin to make mistakes, or revert to rules of thumb or previous decisions, or something that feels safe. Our modern lives have become so complex, and entail so many choices that our minds are exhausted. The simplicity and sparseness of environments in a Zen monastery, the regular schedule, the focus on the ordinary tasks of everyday living clear a space where the cognitive costs of decisions are dramatically reduced, where one can begin to simply breathe and attend to the experience of the path. It all feels so appealing, that simplified world. The only difficulty with monastery living is that it is not so congruent with these messy lives we live, our commitments and responsibilities, our families, and the work we are doing in the world.

So we make half-hearted stabs at the practice and worry that we will not “get anything out of it,” we compare ourselves to others (what are they getting that I am not? what do they have that I am lacking?) And on and on it goes. We are lucky if we can simply stay with a practice at all. It’s so easy to run whenever you encounter something that isn’t what you want, or to resist every time your choices are limited. The forms are perfect for that, even the minimal forms we have here. We feel resistance whenever our personal sense of how things ought to be is assaulted, which in Zen practice is about every 30 seconds.

But sometimes, and this is true for most folks here, we taste something that engages our curiosity, or offers a glimpse of something different. It is not just a slightly different way of

viewing the world; it is like plunging into a different universe, even if it seems a bit familiar at first. As we sit, we begin to suspect that our understanding of freedom is much too limited, and even wrong. There is no freedom, in practical terms, for individuals, no freedom as an experience I have or a circumstance that I encounter. Furthermore, there is no lack of freedom, only misguided ideas and the residue of conditioning. In zazen as these ideas and traces of conditioning are revealed for what they are, physical sensations and mental constructions, we clarify the great matter of true liberation, which is not the absence of constraints, but the capacity for liberating activity in the midst of any circumstances. It's not the ability to choose from an endless array of possibilities, but the immediate and spontaneous recognition of one liberating possibility. We are not getting free ourselves, we are freedom liberating the situation by revising its meaning, as Hershock says away from samsara and toward nirvana, from suffering to freedom for all beings in the situation. How do we do this? What does that mean? It means, of course, that there is no lack of anything needed; anyone can bring this intention and orientation into any situation. Anyone may offer the possibility of turning the situation toward spaciousness, ease, and true liberation and away from suffering and separation. There is abundance in it: not the abundance of myriad choices, the abundance of your own being coming forth and serving this vast liberating activity. In this way, the question of whether we are getting what we want, or whether we are making the right choices, become irrelevant. They simply dissolve in the present moment experience.

So many of the circumstances in our lives are thrown down before us and demand a response. We feel bothered or burdened by the requirements or expectations of the situations in which we feel ensnared: a difficult teenager, a dying parent, a toxic environment, a world seemingly spinning beyond anyone's control. We may feel pressured on every side by obligations we struggle to meet, by relationships that are hopelessly tangled in their own histories, and we struggle. This is dukkha. Freedom does not mean getting rid of or straightening these things out so I can do whatever I want without restraint. As we discover when we face a series of impacts in our lives, as I have over the past few months, our practice serves us by helping us stay present in the situation so that we may be a resource for every being in it. I could not rouse my father in his hospital bed, I couldn't even say encouraging words to cheer him or the others around him. I could only look deeply into his eyes and connect. In wordless ways I simply offered this most human quality: I am here. We would never choose the losses, pain and suffering we encounter in ourselves and in others. Yet we can meet them with a simple mind, a simple heart. The choices come down to one: the full and complete expression of who you are. And this choice is made every single moment. So don't worry if you miss one, another is coming along right behind it. When we are imprisoned in the idea of freedom as having our preferences, we miss the true freedom that is right in front of us. In practice, we rattle the prison door only to discover it has been unlocked all along.

There is no liberation; there is only liberating activity, and everything, everything is carrying it forward all at once, together. Your confusion, your doubts about yourself, your stumbling on the

path are all part of it, not some difficulty preventing it. Your awakened being is constantly uncovering itself, revealing itself even in your struggles. There is no freedom, there is only freeing. And we turn this liberating activity both inward and toward the world; it can only be accomplished all together,, with all beings. That is why the Buddha said, on seeing the morning star, "I together with all beings, awaken!"