



To Be Truly Free

In a time when there is a heightened awareness of global terror and especially during the American presidential elections, the word “freedom” is often heard. But what does “freedom” mean in a Buddhist perspective? During teachings on Shantideva’s Bodhisattva’s Way of Life, Geshe Jamphel, abbot and resident teacher of Nalanda Monastery in France, had this to say:

Many countries today have the freedom of democracy, whereas others lack this freedom. If we look at a democratic country such as France, we will see that it didn’t have democracy from the beginning, but by looking at the faults of their former system and the benefits of democracy, the French people chose democracy. Equality, liberty, and fraternity were only spoken about at a certain moment and not before. We can say that the French people chose this freedom of democracy that they have now, but before they did not have this.

All beings need freedom, and this is the most excellent condition for humans to live with. However, as long as we are under the power of factors such as the afflictions, our freedom is lost. Humans look for happiness and do not want suffering. But despite not wanting it, suffering arises due to the afflictions. Because the unwished for arises, we can see that there is a lack of freedom. We need to get away from the unwished for, namely, the afflictions.

We can look at freedom in different contexts. For example, we don’t wish for the weather to be too hot or too cold, we don’t want to be thirsty, and we don’t want to be hungry; we want to be healthy and not ill. However, things do not always arise as we wish them too. Therefore, we can clearly see that we don’t have freedom. Also, in a free country like France, there are still people living in situations of unbearable suffering, which may lead them to commit suicide. You could even say that such a person is less free than someone in prison. If we do not make effort to be liberated from the afflictions, our mind will deteriorate into such states. In short, if we don’t make effort to construct a path that is liberating us from samsara, we can construct as many freedoms as we want in this world, but we will never be free.

Someone who achieves what he was looking for, such as definite emergence and the correct view, has freedom as he has

liberated himself completely from being under the sway of the afflictions. Usually when we talk about freedom, we refer to things like political freedom, or living in a country where you have freedom of movement, and so forth. However, in such a country you may still not have the employment that you would like, or the partner that you would like; so you do not achieve what you are seeking. Such a person cannot be said to be really free as he isn’t achieving what he is looking for. You may have freedom of movement, but if you don’t have a resource such as money, you cannot exercise this freedom much. The Tibetans in exile have the freedom to practice the Dharma, yet we demonstrate for freedom for Tibetans in Tibet! So the freedom of movement and being able to practice the Dharma is not enough.

We don’t have freedom in samsara because we are under the control of the afflictions, which leads to the generation of suffering. The fact that the suffering we do not wish for still arises, shows that we have no freedom. In contrast, a bodhisattva is under the control of virtuous mental factors, such as love and compassion, which lead to bliss and happiness. He has achieved what he wished for and therefore we can say he is free. However, there is no freedom for one who acts under the control of the afflictions. All errors arise on the basis of conditions. They are not independent or self-powered. All the faults of the afflictions and our acts that are motivated by the afflictions arise on the basis of conditions; and these conditions are the afflictions themselves.

We have the causes for being patient and the causes for being angry. However, due to our habituation with anger, these causes are very strong; but because we have buddha potential, we have the ability to strengthen our habituation with patience. Having heard Dharma teachings we can strengthen our understanding of the benefits of patience and

our habituation with it. Those who are under the sway of the afflictions have a choice, but not knowing about Dharma they make wrong choices. We who know about Dharma, however, are more likely to make right choices. We have been under the sway of the afflictions since beginningless time. Now that we understand the situation, we should make effort to cultivate patience and the other antidotes.

Causes and conditions which produce everything are neither inherently existent nor free from previous causes and conditions. The causes and conditions from which we have arisen are also not free. We did not arise from a creator god, or the actions of a certain person, or other causes that are free from other influences.

Buddhists maintain that every cause was caused itself. No cause has freedom or independence, but rather each cause arises on the basis of numerous previous causes. So from many previous causes, the later results come about. We can therefore see how the mind has been afflicted since beginningless time. On the basis of this mind, which always has a preceding moment acting as a cause, sufferings arise within our own continuum. We ourselves have created these

sufferings. It is not that someone else has given them to us. Thus, we ourselves have to work with our mind to change this situation. No one else will bring this about for us.

If you decide that from today onwards anger has no benefit and therefore you will no longer be angry with others, this is an attitude that you are free to develop. It will not be granted to you by a supreme god.

There is no independent cause. All impermanent phenomena are other-powered because they have causes. That is why our afflictions and our suffering arise in dependence on previous causes. The pacification of the afflictions and suffering is not granted to us by a creator god or external being. We ourselves, relying on studying, reflecting, and meditating, can bring this pacification about. Bringing about the total cessation of all the causes of our suffering is something that we have to do for ourselves. The more we lessen the causes of our suffering, the more we become free. When finally all the causes of our suffering have ceased, we attain an authentic freedom. ☸

This is an extract from Nalanda Monastery's five-year full-time residential Basic Program. The transcripts of these teachings, as well as other information, can be found at their web site: www.nalanda-monastery.eu

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