

Achieving Free Will: a Buddhist Perspective



B. Alan Wallace addresses the topic of free will: how Buddhism focuses on how we may achieve greater freedom in the choices we make, rather than struggling with the metaphysical issue of whether we already have free will. Central to the question of free will is the nature of human identity, and it is in this regard that the Buddhist view of emptiness and interdependence is truly revolutionary.

The topic of free will is something that Western philosophers, scientists, and theologians have been debating in the West for more than 2,000 years. I don't see any clear resolution in sight. People are still taking very different perspectives: yes, no, and maybe. Rather than raising the ontological question, the metaphysical question – do we have free will? – there is a much more pragmatic question: can we achieve free will and how might we do so? And we can even ask: to what extent and in what situations are we not free to exercise free will?

THE FREEDOM SPECTRUM

When we are deep asleep we aren't making any choices at all. We're dozey, we're groggy. When we're cruising along in a dream but we don't know we're dreaming, we are reacting mostly out of habit, with not much freedom. If we were free, then when we encountered something unpleasant in the dream we would simply say, "Well, this is a dream, I'm out of here." We're responding emotionally and in every other way as if it was really taking place in some objective reality out there. But, of course, it's not. So in a non-lucid dream in which we don't know that we're dreaming, we fundamentally get it wrong.

In the waking state, when a person is comatose, vegetative, has Alzheimer's, is senile, there is not much freedom. There must be a spectrum between not having any freedom at all and other occasions when we have more. What is the extent of our freedom when we are caught in a rage or powerful craving or addiction? We cannot simply wake up one morning and say, "You know, I'm tired of being angry. I think I won't

do that anymore," or "Oh, that doesn't seem to be working out too well as a strategy for finding happiness. I think I'll just stop craving and attachment."

In Buddhism, this issue is raised in a very dynamic way. There are times when we appear to be radically free and times when we are profoundly devoid of free will.

But now, freedom from what? I'm going to define free will in a practical way, as the ability to make choices that are conducive to supporting and nurturing our own and others' well-being: our own and others' genuine happiness.

What do I mean by genuine happiness? Genuine happiness is a quality of well-being that comes not because we've encountered some pleasant stimulus from the world – some really good food, a pleasant fragrance, or even a pleasant thought – but rather a quality of well-being that comes from what we bring to the world, rather than what we get from it.

LUCID DREAMS AND THE NATURE OF REALITY

People who have already had lucid dreams already have some taste of this. They'll be cruising through a non-lucid dream, most of which is rather unpleasant, too much anxiety. And then suddenly, they recognize, "I am dreaming!" It's a radical discontinuity from the non-lucid dream to the lucid dream, of suddenly getting it: "I am dreaming!" Suddenly they are awake within the dream.

There is a euphoria that comes from lucid dreams, a kind of bliss that arises from getting it right, experientially knowing the nature of reality you are experiencing at the present moment. Lucidity! And the more thoroughly you understand the nature of that dream reality, frankly, the

greater the bliss. It is not because something nice happened to you in a dream. It's coming from your insight into the nature of the dream. So, free will would then be something to be cultivated rather than simply pulling on our beards and wondering, "Do I have it? Or do I not? Do I have it? Or do I not?"

SPECTRUMS OF MEANINGS

Here's a statement I gleaned from the Buddha's own teaching during his forty-five years of teaching about 2,500 years ago. He declared, "What a person considers and reflects upon for a long time, to that his mind will bend and incline." What we attend to, what we consider, what we reflect upon, we pay attention to, that is where our mind is going to go.

It is enormously relevant for the whole question of free will to focus on what people are really paying attention to. Physicists observe the purposeless behavior of inorganic configurations of mass-energy. A ball accelerating down a ramp is not trying to get there quickly. It has no purpose. It is just happening. The movements of galactic clusters have no purpose out there. These are inorganic configurations of mass-energy that are just happening. The physicist observes how it's happening and tries to find patterns or laws that would make sense of their movements. That is one spectrum of reality.

Another spectrum of reality is the purposeful behavior of conscious organisms. This is what zoologists attend to. Animals move for a reason. You see ants trooping off to the spilt honey in your kitchen. "Why is the ant going there? Oh, I see, there is some food there. Why is the bird behaving that way? Oh, I see, it's defending its nest." There is a purpose. That's something you don't find in electrons or galaxies.

Psychologists observe the meaningful behavior of human agents. We are not only purposeful, but there is meaning to what we do: the creation of art, for example, of music, of science, philosophy, and religion, as well as many other human endeavors.

And finally, I'll add in the spectrum, contemplatives. Contemplatives attend to many things, but one primary focus of attention is the spiritual dimension of human existence, seeking this more transcendent dimension of our existence, to which the pursuit of genuine happiness is central.

DETERMINISM

At the time of the Buddha there were great thinkers, philosophers, and contemplatives who tackled these fundamental issues

about our own existence. And they raised two hypotheses: determinism and indeterminism, with various nuances. One theory of determinism says that everything that occurs is due to our past karma. That is, our actions in past lives, whatever is happening to us now, everything that is happening to us now, "Oh, that's your karma." You have a happy marriage, a rotten marriage, you get sick, you get well, you have an accident, you avoid misfortune, you're rich, you're poor, high status, low status, "It's your karma." Everything that is happening, "Oh, it's just my past karma."

There were those who held the deterministic belief that everything is due to the will of God. There is a mastermind, a CEO of the universe, who's running the whole show, and everything that happens to you is the will of God. And we passively acquiesce. "It's the will of God. What can you do?"

Then also: "It's in the stars. It's in the Ouija board. It's in the Tarot cards. It's out there. It's just gonna happen." So, determinism, predestination, crops up in the East and West.

There are some neuroscientists who say that everything you do is predetermined by unconscious brain activity. Every apparent choice you make was never a choice in the first place. What's really governing our behavior, they say, is brain chemistry, neurosynapses, dendrites, neurons, the activation of glial cells, general body chemistry, and genes: we are just basically pawns in the great game of biochemistry. If we bring in quantum physics, complexity theory, and chaos theory, perhaps everything boils down to the random movements of elementary particles in the brain.

The Buddha looked at the various interpretations of determinism and he scrapped them all. First of all, we don't know any of those are true. So we are not compelled to believe any of those. Secondly, if we embrace determinism, this is going to take away from our incentive to avoid unwholesome, harmful behavior, and it's going to take away from our incentive to transform ourselves, to seek more meaningful lives, happier lives, more fulfilling lives. It's going to make us apathetic. And that's not a good thing. So if it were absolutely clear that determinism is true, then we'd just have to bite the bullet, and say, "OK, it's true." In that case, apathy would be in accord with reality.

INDETERMINISM

If there is no determinism, is there indeterminism? Do things happen for no reason at all? Is it just random, chaotic? Good luck? Bad luck? In other words, are we living in a

willy-nilly universe? A stochastic, random universe? Buddha rejected that one as well for very pragmatic reasons. Again, first of all, we don't know it is true. Secondly, this, too, will take away any incentive for moral responsibility. If everything you do is predetermined, then you simply can't be responsible for anything any more than your refrigerator is responsible for getting too cold if the dial is set too low. And likewise, if things are completely indeterminate, happening for no reason at all, once again there are simply no grounds for any moral responsibility at all. So these are two dangerous hypotheses. Buddha rejected both of those largely on pragmatic grounds: adopting them as a basis for living has deeply harmful results.

FREE WILL AND THE AUTONOMOUS SELF

Normally when free will is posited somebody must have it, right? What Buddha found was a complete lack of evidence of any autonomous self that exists either among or apart from the aggregates, the components and processes of the body-mind. Nowhere in all of that mix, this nexus of causal interrelationship between the body-mind and environment, did the Buddha find any evidence for there being a separate self, something that is either to be found among the body-mind or apart from the body-mind. If there is no such independent self, then who could possibly possess a free will that operates independently of prior causes and conditions?

And now, let's start running some experiments. Think about grapefruits. Pink ones! And white rabbits. And when I suggest this, you can either go along with me or say, "I'm not going to be bossed around. No white rabbits for me. I'm going to think about apples. You go ahead with your grapefruit experiment, but I'm going my own way. I'm not part of the herd. I'm an apple man." You had some say in the matter. You didn't suddenly have to think about grapefruits, although maybe you did very fleetingly, but if you wanted to redirect your attention, you could, couldn't you, to something else? So doesn't it seem like you do exist as something separate from your body and mind? Is that an illusion? Big question.

KARMA AS VOLUNTARY ACTIVITY

According to Buddhism, we have a measure of free will. We can reflect upon our options: "Shall I or shall I not?" If we can't reflect on our options at all, then there is no choice taking place, and so the question of *free* choice vanishes entirely. We are free insofar as we can make choices that are

well informed and lead to well-being for ourselves and others. That is a measure of free will.

CULTIVATION OF FREE WILL

Another dimension of awareness is posited in Buddhism. It is called the "brightly shining mind". This is something contemplatives in different schools of Buddhism have discovered. Buddha says that this mind when cultivated is enormously pliable, not set in granite, not absolutely predetermined by anything: not genes, biochemistry, God, karma, or anything else. It's a promising note here. He declared, "Monks, I know of no other single process so quick to change as is this mind."

When we go into that ground from which thoughts, emotions, memories, and so forth emerge, there is a substratum that can be accessed through meditation. Its very nature is luminosity, it makes manifest appearances. "This mind is brightly shining, but it is veiled by adventitious defilements." So this luminous dimension of consciousness is covered over, it is obscured by conceptual grasping, by hatred, by craving, and other afflictions of the mind. Which is to say, when one plumbs the depths of awareness, one discovers a dimension that is not sullied, not contaminated, not shrouded by these mental afflictions or defilements. It is, by nature, pure. If this is true, then it suggests that freedom might be something that can be achieved by purifying the mind of its afflictive tendencies and cultivating greater insight. It also suggests that freedom is something that might be discovered by penetrating the veils of the ordinary functioning of our psyche to a deeper dimension.

Ordinary sentient beings are not free. We are constrained by mental afflictions, such as craving, hostility and delusion. To my mind, that's an empirical fact. Some people might be absolutely fixated on acquiring a lot of money, fame and so forth. At other times, the mind becomes deluded by hostility, by rage. Where is the freedom? Can we ever just snap our fingers and say, "I've had enough"?

The brightly shining mind that is uncontaminated by afflictions is a source of freedom. So freedom is not something we have to create but something that can be discovered. We can just drop the question, "Do we have it or do we not?" and say, "How can we cultivate more?" The great eighth-century Indian Buddhist philosopher, contemplative and saint Shantideva comments, "A person whose mind is distracted lives between the fangs of mental afflictions." When this is clinically diagnosed, it is known as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) – a mind that is caught up in one wandering

thought after another, or starts falling into a stupor, getting spaced out. To the extent that our minds are prone to such attentional imbalances, it is as if our psychological immune system is shot. We have HIV of the mind. You know that when the mind becomes distracted and any mental affliction dominates it, that affliction will probably snag us, and where are the defenses? This is something I've come to call the "obsessive-compulsive delusional disorder".

VAJRAYANA AND IMAGINING THE FUTURE

Finally, let's turn to Vajrayana, a more esoteric dimension of Buddhist theory and practice. The basic idea in Buddhism is that by cultivating the mind, we causally move toward greater freedom, liberation, awakening, and one day in the future we will become buddhas. The underlying premise is that every sentient being has the capacity to be perfectly enlightened, every sentient being has the capacity to be free, liberated from suffering and its causes.

According to the philosophical view of the Middle Way, time does not inherently exist independent of conceptual designations. This implies that the reality we experience in the present moment is not simply presented to us. Rather, we are co-creating it by the way we conceptually designate what we are experiencing. And we are free to designate it in ways that are most conducive to our own and others' well-being. Moreover, the past is not inherently set in concrete. It, too, exists only in relation to conceptual designations, so by altering the way we designate the past, it will influence us in different ways. Shifting our attitudes and ways of conceiving the present and past is a central element of the "mind training" (*lojong*) genre of Tibetan Buddhist practice, and it opens up whole dimensions of freedom.

Vajrayana Buddhism goes even further. Since time does not absolutely exist, then our buddhahood in the future is not absolutely in the future. So instead of waiting for it, we can cast our attention and our imagination to the future in which we will be enlightened and take the fruit as the path. In this way, not only are we influenced by our own past and by the present moment, but we let ourselves be influenced by what hasn't happened yet. We take the fruit of the path to liberation as the path itself. And we imagine being a buddha, right now.

Why should we stop there? We can transform our very sense of our own identity. This is a conceptual construct anyway, so we can deconstruct it and dissolve it into emptiness. Let it dissolve into the brightly shining mind – this luminous nature of awareness in the deepest ground of the mind. And

out of that we can designate ourselves as buddhas. This is not simply a play of the imagination, a kind of make-believe. We release our ordinary sense of who we are, recognizing its emptiness of any inherent existence of its own. It's simply a conceptual construct, which we now release into emptiness, replacing it with "divine pride". In this Vajrayana practice, we assume the identity of a buddha and develop pure perception with regard to others as well, viewing all that arises as expressions of buddha-nature. This brings much greater freedom. Much, much greater freedom.

WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO HAVE PERFECT FREE WILL?

So, who are we? This question is fundamental to the whole question of free will, whether we have it or not, whether it can be cultivated or not. What would it mean to have perfect free will? If it's a gradient, is there some kind of endpoint, a perfection of freedom? I would say, yes. We can conceive of it. We have perfect freedom when the choices we make from moment to moment, whatever arises, are motivated by compassion, guided by wisdom, and they're just the right choices based upon sound understanding of what is truly conducive to our own and others' flourishing and well-being, for the alleviation of suffering, for the freedom of everyone. But – how much freedom is possible?

The yearning to be better people – to be more compassionate, more caring, more understanding, more patient, wiser, and to have genuine happiness – is an impulse, a dimension within us that leaves us unsatiated in a way that is both the most painful aspect and the most promising aspect of our existence, I think. And isn't it marvelous that whether it is sex, or food, or possessions, or fame, or reputation, or the love and appreciation of others, whatever it is, isn't it wonderful that we are just not satisfied? Because if we were satisfied, then we'd cut ourselves so short. It's that dissatisfaction that moves us, and moves us, and moves us. It does not let us rest until we find what is of greatest meaning, until we discover for ourselves our deepest dimension and our capacity for freedom, for awakening, for genuine happiness. ☸

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