

Chapter 15

Freedom

Discussion points

- Freedom to do what I like
- Freedom to do what I ought to do?
- Freedom through the noble eightfold path

These days the notion of freedom that most young people, in fact majority of the society, have is : freedom to do what one likes – to eat what one likes, to dress the way one likes, to go wherever one likes at whatever time one likes, and this often brings them into conflict with others, especially the elders in the family who advise restraint. This conflict is usually explained away as ‘generation gap’ – a tautological term which doesn’t help anyone – neither the youth nor the elders. The elders keep on lamenting about the ‘moral degeneration in the society’ and the young blame elders for their inability to ‘move with changing times’. It is only when this ‘freedom’ takes its toll in the form of various addictions and/or brings the youth on the wrong side of the law, or causes breakdown of the family relationships that the enormity of the impact of untrammelled freedom on our life is realized. Let us try to rationally analyze this concept of freedom in the light of the teachings of the Buddha.

The prevailing concept of freedom presumes that what one wants to do is one’s own ‘free will’, not influenced by any other factor. This, the Buddha tells us, is an illusion. What we term as ‘free will’ is essentially a manifestation of reactions based on the deep seated pleasure-pain principle (PPP) – the infantile tendency to hold on to pleasant feelings and push away unpleasant feelings, and to get approval of the people around. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#) feelings arise due to the interactions at each of the sense doors. These can be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Thus when we see some form, the feeling may be pleasant , unpleasant or neutral; and this is strongly influenced by our perceptions. Seeing a young boy wearing ripped jeans, would create unpleasant feelings , and even anger (‘uncouth youth’), in some, while it may create pleasant feelings and a desire to emulate (‘really hip’), in others. It all depends on the perception, the type of conditioning. Take another example – a soft slow melodious song may be disliked

by some , as a ‘ boring sleep inducing lullaby’ , while others may enjoy it as ‘celestial music’; a fast moving rock music may be disliked by some as ‘terrible cacophonous noise’ others would feel it extremely joyful and ‘invigorating’. Similar situations arise for other sense-contacts – contact of tongue with food, the contact of nose with fragrance, the contact of body with a tactile object, and the contact of mind with some thought. But one thing is certain : all these feelings are impermanent. Sooner or later, these would change. If we are ignorant about the evanescent nature of these feelings, we react to these in tune with the PPP, and consider it as an expression of ‘my free will’, typically:

‘I am grown up and know what is good for me, and what is not. I have read “red wine is good for health”, and so, dad, don’t tell me drinking is bad.’

‘What does he think of himself? If he ridicules me, I am free to give it back in the way I like. If I feel like hitting him, I will not stop myself.’

‘This is the in-thing these days – ripped jeans ! I am free to wear what I like; Mom, don’t tell me it looks shabby.’

‘Living with these old people is really a hell ... no freedom. I think we should move out and live separately.’

A calm reflection of the above expressions of freedom would reveal their shallowness. These are in fact the ‘cries’ of persons trapped in what, to paraphrase Plato, can be termed as the ‘the prison house of senses’ , who fail to see that their illusory ‘freedom’ is basically a manifestation of their conditioning.

“The world says: “You have needs -- satisfy them. You have as much right as the rich and the mighty. Don't hesitate to satisfy your needs; indeed, expand your needs and demand more.” This is the worldly doctrine of today. And they believe that this is freedom. The result for the rich is isolation and suicide, for the poor, envy and murder.”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Nevertheless, as we grow, sooner or later, we do realize the limitations, and the harmful consequences of this notion of ‘external’ freedom, of viewing freedom as a license to (animal) instincts. Actions driven by impulsive behavior originating from latent tendencies of greed, lust, anger, hatred, delusion lead to a sense of ennui, frustration and

eventually self-depreciation. One then yearns for real freedom, real autonomy, the **ability to do what ought to be done**, so that our actions don’t bring misery in their wake, but a sense of satisfaction, happiness and joy. One begins to realize that one is trapped by these latent tendencies, and even though the hard knocks of life bring about a change in perception—for example, smoking and drinking may now be clearly seen as harmful to health – yet one is not able to give up these habits.

One happens to hear that many people in similar situations came out of these harmful habits by attending a meditation retreat, and then is drawn towards the teachings of the Buddha, the noble eightfold path. As one learns the art of leading life in tune with universal ethical precepts, raises the level of self-restraint by the practice of wise concentration, and imbibes the wise view, the triune insights of impermanence, un-satisfactoriness and impersonal nature of all experiences, one gains the necessary mental strength to bring about the inner transformation – to gain inner freedom, the ability to do what ought to be done. The extent to which one becomes adept in following the path determines the extent of one's 'real freedom'. Thus, even by following the basic ethical precepts, as explained beautifully by the Buddha⁸⁰, one gives and gains freedom:

"[when] one ... abstains from taking life... abstains from taking what is not given... abstains from illicit sex... abstains from lying... abstains from taking intoxicants... he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression."

Thus, by following ethical principles, we gain freedom from remorse. Remembering this gives happiness.

By the practice of wise concentration, we gain freedom from unhappiness caused by the wandering mind. A focused mind has penetrating mindfulness. Life would continue to present us with pleasant and unpleasant situations, but rather than succumbing to the 'pulls' and 'pushes' of the resulting feelings, we would try to be mindful. Many a time reactions to the feelings may arise, but because of wise concentration we are able to resist the force of temptations and avoid unwholesome reaction. We have a limited taste of freedom from the 'prison house of senses' and the opportunities for our innate wisdom to guide our actions increase, and many a times we are able to take wise decisions. This increases our confidence and we follow the path even more earnestly.

Further, as we cultivate wise intentions and the wise view is strengthened, we 'see' the three poisons – greed, hatred and delusion – for what they really are. Understanding that these are the root causes of bondage, we practice giving these up and thus gain complete freedom from all unhappiness. The various vicissitudes of life are now unable to shake our equanimity, our peace of mind. That's the reason that the Buddha proclaims emphatically⁸¹:

⁸⁰ AN 8.39 Abhisanda Sutta

⁸¹ Ud 5.5 Uposatha Sutta

"Just as in the great ocean there is but one taste — the taste of salt — so in this Doctrine and Discipline there is but one taste — the taste of freedom"

As we follow the path , at every stage we experience greater inner freedom, and gain the ability to do what ought to be done. That is the real freedom which promotes the welfare of all and we are able to lead a truly happy life – free from remorse, full of joy.

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