Free Will: Is It Available or Useful?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 12 min read

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In truth, it is preferable not to have choice...'
Free will has been a problem since the dawning of consciousness. Are we completely at the mercy of the gods or do we have some control over our lives? Is there a measure of free will? Do we really have choices? Is having choice the same as free will? In the highly individualistic culture of the West, the sense of being an individual as opposed to a social being or indeed another animal embedded in nature, makes the notion of free will, freedom of choice, very much part of our self definition.
However, from the Buddha's point of view it is not a question we should be asking because it is leading us astray ... But let us first look at the notion of free will.
Our culture, with its biased emphasis towards thought, rationalises our desire for freedom. We generally think only in terms of what we are free to 'think and do'. There is our much vaunted freedom of thought and speech. And freedom to act whether it be something trivial, such as which soup to buy, or of great importance, such as the decision to take a job. As to exactly how free we really are becomes a bone of contention between different philosophies.
However, in ordinary daily life, whatever the arguments are, we 'feel' ourselves to be in turn restricted and confined or 'free and easy'.[illegible] And this is the starting place for the Buddha.
In the Discourse on the Supreme Net (Brahmajala Sutta, No 1 in the Long Discourse), he lists many views around such speculative topics as whether the world is eternal or not, whether it is infinite or not, whether the self is eternal or not and so on. All such views he says are 'merely the feeling of those who do not know and see, the worry and uncertainty of those immersed in craving'.[illegible]
So how do our feelings influence our view of free will? According to the Buddha's psychology whatever we come to know is dependent on contact, by which is meant stimuli coming from one of the six senses, the sixth being that part of our mind (some would prefer brain) that receives not only these outer stimuli but stimuli arising within the mind by way of memory. From contact arise feelings which are perceived as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Feelings and perceptions arise simultaneously. As soon as we perceive something, we begin to think about it. And this thinking proliferates, fuelled as it were by that feeling (emotions and moods) which finds expression and relief in thinking and imagining.
If, for instance, boredom arises in my mind, there will be an immediate desire to seek

distraction.

I decide to eat something. If there is nothing to snack on, I feel frustrated. My free will is thwarted. So all thinking and imagining turns out to be but metaphor for our feelings. This may come as a surprise. But think of the 'isms' of the last century, for example Fascism and Communism. Each has elicited a tremendous amount of emotion from its followers.

Now, the root feeling-perception we have is of being 'me'. That self-awareness, the feeling of presence, lies at the heart of our relationship to the world. At its most deluded, the 'me' believes itself to be this body and personality. The fundamental aim of the self is to feel safe and happy in this body and heart-mind and in the world. So, in order to fulfil that aim, it desires to control the body, emotions and thinking as well as the world with all its sentient beings, including humans of course, and objects and the whole of nature to boot! It is fearful of the body falling sick and dying. It likes to live in an interior atmosphere of happiness so it suppresses anything it experiences as painful, such as fear and depression and indulges whatever it experiences as pleasurable, such as sex, greed, attachment to people, love of arts and so on. When the self can fulfil these desires and feel happy, it has exercised its free will freely.

In the second talk that the Buddha gives to the five companions soon after his enlightenment, however, he points out how this self wants to be in control. He states: 'If the self were in control of the body, it would be able to say: Be like this, or be like that, but since it is not in control of the body, it therefore cannot be the body.' Here, the Buddha is not talking about simple movements, but the body as an organism. We cannot make it grow any taller or prevent it from growing old and so on.

This wanting to control is what the Buddha would have said we really mean by free will. For after all, if we are to receive all that we desire then we need to be in control of the pleasure we seek. With money, for instance, we can satisfy our sensual pleasure. But then we need to be in control of how much money we have. So it is because we fail to achieve this that different views have arisen on this subject. And in our Western philosophy and religious tradition we have three main positions: fatalism, libertarianism and determinism.

Fatalism is the view that the self is impotent. Acts of will by the self have no effect. It is that feeling of having no control over our lives. Everything that happens has been previously ordained and the self can do nothing about it.[illegible] It does not matter whether I run, walk or skip blindfolded across the road, I shall only be knocked over if it was bound to happen anyway. Such a view can engender a hopeless resignation or sanguine optimism that we might be lucky. It is all in the stars. Or then a person may respond with stoic patience and fortitude.

Even though this is an extreme position, there is plenty in our life experience that seems to support this view. After all, we did not choose to be born, nor do we know the hour or day

of our death. We have had no choice in the cultural conditioning we have received. We can do little about the economic-social-political conditions we find ourselves in. We are at the mercy of the elements. We do not even choose to fall in love. Indeed, when we look back on our lives we can get a feeling that what we thought in the moment were choices were actually no choices at all, but simply what was going to happen anyway!

Such belief also has spiritual consequences. For what then is the point of choosing to do good or bad? It will not make the slightest bit of difference to what is going to happen. In the Buddha's day, such a belief was taught by a certain Makhali Gosala. He said if one were to go down one side of the Ganges, murdering and pillaging or come up the other side with great acts of generosity and compassion, it would not make the slightest bit of difference.

It is also the doctrine first propounded by St. Augustine that since God knew everything, he knew who was to be saved and who was to be damned. Taken to its extreme, the doctrine of predestination, especially as it was explicated by Calvinistic Protestantism, meant that no matter how you behaved, it was already ordained that you would spend eternity in hell or heaven.

Islam can also be fatalistic in the same way, saying it is all the Will of Allah. Indeed, when one considers the inherent suffering in being alive, the inability to find permanent comfort, it is not difficult to take a fatalistic position. Albert Camus, the existentialist novelist and philosopher, felt that it was absurd to suffer a life that only offered dissatisfaction and death. He thought the only way human beings could maintain their dignity in the face of a purposeless existence was either by stoic acceptance or by committing suicide! In the end, a fatalist feels disempowered. The Buddha, on the other hand, empowers us to seek our true destiny to become like him a completely liberated being.

Libertarianism, on the other hand, is the understanding that we do have free will. That 'we can do our own thing in our own way, in our own time'. Such a person feels empowered to make choices and believes in the power of positive thinking. Again looking back on our lives, we can see that decisions made in childhood are still having their effect, such as choices we made about what we wanted to study and what sort of work we wanted to do. It is we after all who create our own perceptions of the world and then try to manipulate the world to fit in with our desires. We may not always get what we want, but we would not get anything were it not for the freedom of our will to choose what we want. Indeed, when we take the time to ponder situations, we can make rational and responsible decisions which effect the situation. Such actions are not, therefore, predetermined nor are they random. For instance, rather than be ensnared in power games with people at work, I can sit back for a moment, think about the way things are and make decisions to undermine those power games and work towards harmony.

Such a view supports the notion of individual rights, free voting and free speech and even

on a more abstract level, a capitalist market left to its own communal dynamic, its own 'free will'. However, it can tend to put the accent too much on the individual and underplay the effects of society. The individual is made entirely responsible for their acts without any mitigating circumstance. For instance, in high unemployment, the fault can be placed on the worker for not searching for work, dismissing as unimportant the prevailing economic situation the worker finds themself in, or blaming the worker's lack of skills training which, of course, does make them unable to respond creatively. Such extreme forms of capitalism lead to a dog-eat-dog society, where some gain the exercise of free will that comes with power and others find themselves utterly disempowered to make any choice that might change their situation.

At a spiritual level, libertarianism gives lie to the idea that there is a rational self somehow detached from the world which, from a godlike position, can intervene in events. It is that feeling of 'me' again. A 'me' that floats within the world untouched by it, yet able to act upon it. A 'me' that is not part of the chain of cause and effect. From the Buddha's point of view, this is the source of all our misery! The self is as conditioned as everything else.

We say the Buddha was self-enlightened. But what do we actually mean by that? Does it equate to the Western idea of the self-made man, the self-made woman? Such ideas give the impression that such people arrived at their achievements without the help of any other person whatsoever. But riches, fame and power are gained by the support of others - if not on their backs. The Buddha would have been the first to acknowledge his indebtedness to all the teachers who had influenced him. For surely, it was gratitude that made him think of offering his teaching to his two main teachers. It was the fact that no-one in his day, as far as we know, had reached the full enlightenment, and the final leap, as it were, had to be into an unknown that made him self-enlightened and thereby able to start a new dispensation.

The third position is determinism. Here, unlike fatalism, personal decision-making does have an effect on events. But unlike libertarianism, it understands that personal decision-making is also part of the cause and effect chain. In the Buddhist scriptures, the Jains are said to hold this view, but only as a strictly historical sequence. It meant that the work of a spiritual seeker was simply to put an end to the effects of past kamma. So, one stopped doing anything and finally one stopped eating altogether. This was the proper end of whoever sought the Jain path to liberation. The Buddha's response was that this did not take into account present decisions. Even the present decision to stop eating was an act of will and therefore would have karmic effects. There was no escape from karma. Even an enlightened being produces karma, but since all delusion of self is gone, there is no more attachment and so no self-becoming.

As for these perspectives, fatalism, determinism and libertarianism, it might be argued that it is when we look back on events that there may arise that feeling that everything has

turned out just as it was meant to. We can feel that events have occurred and would have occurred despite our decision-making. But when we are struggling in the present with a choice - whether to change jobs or not, whether to get married or not - we can have the feeling that we do have a freedom of choice and that our choice will have a considerable, if not at times a revolutionary, effect on our lives.
However, from the Buddha's point of view, we are asking the wrong question. Free will or no free will, the problem lies in the inherent unsatisfactoriness of life. At the most profound level, the level from which all consequent illusions arise, we find the 'me', this nebulous idea of a self. The self discovers that the world is full of pleasant experiences and unpleasant experiences. It creates a dualistic world, itself opposed to other - whether accomplice or rival - and the pleasant opposed to the unpleasant. It enters a game driven by greed and aversion - indulging and accumulating or rejecting and annihilating. So it is that the self feels itself to have power, the power to choose.

The right question, then, is how do we put an end to suffering? And to do so means to cut at the very root. First of all we need to correct our understanding about conditionality. There is indeed cause and effect coming through from past events. But there are also conditions that arise from different sources, which add a chaotic element to the otherwise preconditioned moment. At the beginning of any course on meditation that I teach, a group of people arrives from different starting points, different lines of cause and effect. Coming together, they now influence each other, in the creative, dynamic present. The outcome of the course will depend on that unforeseeable mix of people.
Secondly, because the aim is to put an end to suffering, the concern is not with freedom of choice arising out of the self's definition of free will, but with discovering the Path to liberation - a liberation from that delusion of a self. In truth, it is preferable not to have choice but simply to be clear as to which way to go. When we set out for a country walk, we are clear about the destination. We have a map and compass and we set out. Should we come to an ambiguous fork, we stop and consult the map. The walk is a process of discovering a piece of countryside with the joyous grand finale at a teashop! The Eightfold Path is a blueprint which saves us from the dilemmas of seeing the world as a procession of choices which lead to success or failure. It presents life more as an exploration, one of trial and error. Even error is part of the Path. It is learning what is not the Path.
So, choices turn out to be but doubt. On the one hand the ignorant self, driven by greed and aversion; on the other hand a growing wisdom, driven by the desire to be liberated from that very self. The search is for clarity. With clarity arises the knowledge that this has to be done. Freedom of choice does not come into the reckoning. For choice on the spiritual path is a manifestation of dilemma, of 'don't know'. 'Should I follow this path or that path? Should I stay with this teacher or find another? I seem to be getting nowhere in my

meditation, what should I do?' When we do discover what it is we ought to do to follow the Path, we feel safe, satisfied and eager. That is why we are at our happiest when all choice is removed and we are doing exactly what we ought to be doing according the Dhamma.
Yet there is will. The Buddha equates will with action. It is a power that produces a thought, word or deed out of a desire. It is what actualises our wishes. In itself, it is neither good nor bad, skilful nor unskilful. All that is determined by our attitude, which again arises out of our wisdom or lack of it. So it is that Right View heads the Eightfold Path. And the will supports that desire to be liberated. This is known as dhamma cetana. It is the force that powers the seeker along the Path.
So when choice arises out of the self, the self deludes us into thinking, 'I should be able to exercise my free will to satisfy my desire'. But in the spiritual life, when choice arises, it arises because of doubt as to what to do. That is why we go to the Dhamma, to the teaching, for guidance. It is the Buddha within seeking the Path and it is usually exactly what 'I' don't want to do.
So when someone is liberated, it is the freedom from that self, from the illusion of choice arising out of the notion of free will, that the Buddha says is the one taste of Nibbana just as salt is the one taste of the ocean. Not the unsatifiable freedom of the hungry self, but the freedom of one released from prison. That is why whenever someone is liberated and attains the end of the path and becomes an Arahant, there is no mention of free will, but of surrender. Here is the normal scriptural refrain of someone who is liberated:
Birth is destroyed.
The holy life has been lived.
What had to be done has been done.
There is no more rebirth into any state of 'self' existence.

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