

Who Decides?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 3 min read

“The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer – often, indeed, to the decider himself.”—John F. Kennedy. At the end of a retreat, in my “Practise in Daily Life” talk, I give a long list of examples of things we can investigate in daily life. One of these is to investigate the process of decision making; to see if we can see what happens, and who decides. With most of the other examples I usually see slowly nodding heads or smiles of recognition and acknowledgement as I suggest something people are already familiar with. But, when it comes to the challenge “who decides?”, invariably the response is a blank stare. I haven’t asked anyone about this, but I get the feeling that people are thinking “Did he really just say ‘who decides?’ ... doesn’t he know?” But, if you’ve ever been present for a “decision”, you’ll know that this is a good challenge! One of the key premises of the Buddha’s teachings is that we are deluded, believing that we are, or have, a permanent, essential Self. We feel that we are the agents of our lives, that we are free to act, and that such actions are by choice - that we can choose. So, an essential aspect of our Self view is that we choose. We cling to this. Powerfully. Our identity is deeply attached to our ability to choose and has been since we were children. Teenagers rebel against their parent’s authority, fighting for their right to decide for themselves. Coming of age is essentially a matter of gaining the right to decide for ourselves. Given all of this, seeing how the process of choosing unfolds can be quite a surprise and because of what we see, can be quite insightful. That’s why I recommend it as a practise in daily life. So, what can we do to watch how decisions are made? Obviously, the first thing we need is mindfulness. We have to be present for our minds. So, next time you’re meditating, when the bell goes, just ask yourself “do I want to get up now?”, and watch carefully for the “answer”. Indeed, you don’t even have to wait, you can do it now. Ask yourself a similar question and look for the decision. What happens? If you look closely, you’ll see that before you’ve even finished asking yourself the question, the mind has presented the answer. You already know what you want! Okay, ask yourself the opposite question, the one you know you don’t want. See that feeling? That feeling of “don’t want!” Quite emphatic, isn’t it. So where was the “agency” in that? Try it again. Keep trying. Every time you’ll find that the answer, the “choice”, is already made. The mind has already “decided”, and “you” are being told. We see that “choosing” is happening, but that we are not the chooser. However, none of this should be seen as a denial of our personal responsibility. The Buddha was quite clear that this wasn’t the case. We are responsible for our actions, including our decisions. He saw that the will (*cetanā*) was conditioned, but that it was also conditioned by concomitant mental factors, thus things in the mind at the time of a willed action, like the preferences of a choice, influence the action. That is, we can, and do, choose! So, this suggestion to watch “who decides?” is actually an exercise in working with not-Self (*anattā*). Just as we see through meditation that thoughts think themselves, that itches just itch, that sights are simply seen, we also see that, ultimately, decisions are

decided with no input from our Self. In my favourite sutta, the Bāhiya Sutta, the Buddha tells Bāhiya to train himself so that “In reference to the seen, there will only be the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized.” And then, “When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of [suffering].” In choosing, there is only the choosing.

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