

You Can't Clone Awakening

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It may seem incongruous or ironic that here we are, hoping for total release from suffering, stress—the freedom of nibbana—and on the way there, we're hoping for states of infinite space, infinite consciousness, bliss, rapture, and yet what are we doing? We're focusing on our breath. We're sitting here in a posture that may or may not be comfortable, and sitting still for long periods of time. There are bound to be parts of the body that grow numb, feel painful. You might wonder: What does this have to do with nibbana? A part of the mind would like to skip over all of this, but you can't. To gain release from suffering, you have to comprehend suffering. To comprehend suffering, you have to learn how to sit with it without suffering from it. To realize the cessation of suffering you have to develop a path, the factors beginning with right view going all the way through right concentration.

One of the big factors is right effort. As the Buddha says, three of the factors of the path circle around all the others: right view, right effort, and right mindfulness. Right view starts out with belief in the principle of action, that actions really do give results, that there is a value to generosity, there is a value to gratitude. If actions didn't give results, generosity and gratitude would be meaningless. Or if our actions were totally under the influence of some outside power, totally determined by what's happened in the past, there'd be no virtue to generosity. And so why would you be grateful for anything? Just that's the way the universe was made—the people who helped you didn't have any choice, or when you're helping them, you don't have any choice. It'd all be meaningless.

But we do have choice. That's why generosity and gratitude are meaningful. We can choose to do the skillful thing or the unskillful thing. If we've been doing unskillful things, we can choose to change our habits. Right in this freedom of choice is where true freedom is going to be found. You see yourself exercising choice, and there's a mystery right there: Why is it that we do have this freedom? Often we practice in a way that seems to deny that freedom. We just go through our old habits without much thought, without much attention to what we're doing, as if everything were on automatic pilot.

But the Buddha is asking us to stop and take stock of the fact that we can choose. And the more you pay attention to this process of choice in the present moment, the more you realize that you have a wide range of choices as to what you could be doing at any particular time. Even just sitting here, you could focus on the breath, you could focus on different meditation objects, or you could sit here focusing on how angry you are at somebody for something that happened 30 years ago—or who knows what else, lots of things you could focus on. But you have that choice.

And you find that once you've made the choice, say, to stick with the breath, other choices will come along, threatening to destroy it. So you have the choice here again to decide: Are you going to run with those other ideas, those other intentions? Or are you going to choose to stay here with the breath?

Especially in the beginning of the practice, it's very easy to go off with your old habits, your old friends, because that's what you've been doing for so long. And you're so oblivious to where the choice is being made that you're hardly even aware that it happened. Sitting here with the breath, all of a sudden you find yourself off on an island in the Atlantic someplace, or sorting through the mind's old movies. And you wonder how you got there.

Well, the mind does have this tendency to cover things up, especially when you've made up your mind to do one thing and then another part of the mind, which is not so happy with that, wants to do something else. It has its way of throwing a burlap sack over your head, so you don't see what's happening. But if you're really determined to stay here with the breath, the mind will come right back. Then if you find yourself slipping off again, if you're really determined to stay with the breath and are really clear in the fact that there is a choice being made someplace here, you'll find that you're getting quicker and quicker at coming back. It helps, though, to have a few strategies up your sleeve, particularly the strategy of making the breath as comfortable as possible, so that it's more attractive to come back to. It feels better.

You can actually reward yourself for coming back. Each time you've wandered off, you catch yourself, come back to the breath, give yourself one really good gratifying, satisfying breath to remind yourself of why you want to be here. And, of course, once you've given yourself one really satisfying breath, why stop with one? Try two, three, four, keep on going.

Then if that particular rhythm of breath gets tiresome or uninteresting, try something else. Learn to play with the breath. That's another area where you begin to see that you have choices. It's in exercising this power of choice and then trying to do it more and more skillfully that you get closer and closer to the ultimate freedom that lies right next to the act of intention.

This is why we have to muck around in the breath, muck around in sitting with the body here, and all these other things that seem so unrelated to total freedom, nibbana, all the glorious pictures we have in our mind about what awakening might be like. Remember, those pictures are fabricated out of ignorance. And no matter how much you read the texts, or how careful you are about finding passages where the Buddha describes a little bit of what it's like to be awakened, you can't clone awakening. Because all you're doing is just indulging in your imagination, indulging in perceptions and fabrications.

There is this tendency. We read one of these passages, say, about the awakened one who experiences just the sight, just the sound, without assuming any person seeing the sight or anything behind the sight, any object to be seen. We think, "Well, if I just get myself so fully in the present moment where there's no division between subject and object, that should do it: a taste of awakening." But it's not. Even if you actually can achieve a oneness of consciousness,

the Buddha noted that there's still stress there, because it's something that has to be maintained. It's not the case that we're suffering because we have a sense of separateness between subject and object, and we can end that suffering by bringing them back together again, glomming them together. Once they're glommed, they don't stay glommed. There's the stress of having to keep them glommed. And there's also the question: Could you function continually that way?

So this tendency we have of trying to clone awakening, trying to imagine ourselves in a totally awakened state, what someone once called the practice of being awakened: That's just one more form of fabrication based on ignorance. And if you've ever read anything about dependent co-arising, you know that ignorance leading to fabrications leads on to more stress and suffering. Freedom isn't found that way. It's found in this very unlikely spot, the point in the present moment where you're making choices and are trying to do it more and more skillfully.

This means, at the very beginning, that if you find the mind is thinking unskillful thoughts imbued with sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness, you try to replace them. And you realize that you can. Sometimes it's harder than other times, but still it's something that can be done. If you recognize that a thought has come from an unskillful intention, you hold it in check and try to replace it with something that comes from a more skillful intention, until the skillful intention becomes more and more habitual. From there, the mind is in a better position to start getting into good states of concentration.

This is how the path factor of right resolve moves from what's called a mundane level to a more transcendent level. You're still thinking. You're thinking about the breath now and evaluating the breath to see: What kind of breathing feels really good? What kind of breathing feels full? What kind of breath energy in the body feels refreshed? And how can that refreshment be maintained to the point where it begins to get rapturous and full?

You eventually find here that there is a sense of refreshment or rapture you've heard about, but it comes, not from trying to clone it, but from looking at the choices you're actually making all the time. When the Buddha talks about the breath as bodily fabrication, it's because there's an element of intention in each breath. So even just looking at your breath, you can begin to see: Where is the intention? How is it fed by the way you perceive the breath? What mental picture do you have of the breathing process? How does it affect the way you breathe? Start experimenting with these questions. See which perceptions feel most gratifying right now, or lead to a breath that feels most gratifying.

You might think of the body as a large sponge—lots of little holes all over; all the pores of your skin are breathing orifices. Or if there's any one part of the body that seems to be deprived of breath—say, right around the heart or the base of the throat—think of there being a large mouth right there, breathing in and breathing out, allowing the breath energy to stay full even as you breathe out.

As you play with this, you begin to gain some understanding about perception and attention—the way you attend to things—and also about your intentions in breathing, your intentions in thinking. It's right there in that area that freedom is going to be found as you keep trying to promote the intention to do things as skillfully as possible, breathe as skillfully as possible, think as skillfully as possible, hold a perception in mind as skillfully as possible. The more skillful you are at these things, the wider the range of skillful choices that present themselves to you—and the more the possibility of freedom begins to open up.

So it's in these simple things, these simple little intentions that we decide on, that we choose from moment to moment: That's where freedom is going to be found—not in trying to clone some picture of awakening that we've gained from the texts.

So as Ajaan Lee says, when you practice, you're meeting up with your defilements. You're going to run into greed, aversion, delusion—all the tricks the mind plays on itself. But if you don't face up to them and learn how to deal with them, you're never going to get past them. If you don't really recognize them for what they are, that picture you have of awakening can get formed by greed, aversion, and delusion. You want some particular idea that sounds nice, or you're averse to certain things in your daily life that you want to just push aside and be rid of, and the whole thing gets wrapped up in delusion.

So when you're cloning awakening, delusion is what's doing the cloning. It's all fabricated out of delusion and ignorance. This is why the Buddha didn't spend much time describing awakening. He described a lot, though, about what the path is like, what to do, what choices to make, because it's in really understanding what it is to make a skillful choice right here that you're going to touch freedom right here.

So pay attention right here. Pay attention especially to your intentions: how they relate to the breath, how they relate to your thoughts about the breath, the feelings around the breath. Play around in this area and you find that it hides something really important. The more you play around, the better your chance of uncovering it.