
Dharma and Personal Responsibility

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Buddhist thinking and practice focuses on freeing ourselves from unhelpful limiting beliefs so that we may see ourselves and the world clearly and act with compassion. In order to let go of limiting beliefs we have to see their negative effect and decide to cease from indulging them. This is facilitated by finding a new site of identification. Traditionally this is done by taking refuge in buddha, dharma and sangha so that we rely on the teaching of the buddha as a means of both avoiding habitual tendencies and of promoting useful qualities such as generosity, gratitude, compassion and forgiveness.

To take refuge and begin on the buddhist path is a decision, an act of free will. It is an adult choice – indeed one needs adult maturity in order to follow the path. Following the path begins with seeing our faults, limits and confusions. Blaming others will not help us do this. Seeing our faults could feel overwhelming if they were taken to be the real truth, the final definition of who we are. But they are not. All sentient beings possess Buddha nature, the basis for and capacity to awaken. The unchanging purity of our Buddha nature shows all faults and limitations to be adventitious not intrinsic.

Dissolving the glue of belief, identification and attachment which binds us to our habitual fixations is made much easier if we accept that it is we who do the binding. When we feel that others control us, hurt us, divert us from our true path we need to look at these feelings and see if they accurately show what is actually happening. We can rarely control other people's behaviour. We can, with effort, control our own. If we focus on what we do, both proactively and reactively, we can start to see that our basic freedom is intact whatever the conditions around us. But if we focus on what the others do to us we lose our sense of freedom, agency and responsibility and, by our own mental activity, our interpretations and judgements, make ourselves prisoners of circumstance.

In order to be a victim there has to be a persecutor – and also the hope of a rescuer. In the moment of being subjected to an attack, in being the victim of the attack, another person might be able to intervene and rescue us from the attack. Whether such a rescuer appears or not, after the attack we may well be hurt, shocked and fearful but we are not any longer victims. The moment of victimhood has vanished and we have to deal with the consequences. In order to do that we have to gather ourselves together and mobilise our resources as best we can. Identifying ourselves as a victim as if it were a new identity is not likely to be helpful as it constellates our functional sense of self around the painful events we have experienced. Who we are now comes to be defined by past events which occurred due to the agency of someone else. In this way we are de-centred from our own lives.

In victim culture the locus of agency and control is experienced as being outside of oneself – other people do things to me, either directly or by changing the environment I am part of. In this orientation I believe that because I am vulnerable other people should protect me, even from myself. I am their responsibility because I am not able to be responsible for myself.

An on-going state of vulnerability may be the case for a child or for an adult with physical or mental disabilities. But even in these cases the person has some degree of agency until it is stifled by pain or fear or anxiety. Being made the victim of an aggressor's attack lasts as long as the attack. After the attack, there may be certain consequences such as physical damage, reverberations of fear and pre-occupation with the event. How much of this is due to the event itself and how much to the person's response to it?

Currently, in Western culture to encourage someone to 'get over it' by telling them that these things happen, would be thought insensitive. Cultural forces seem to increasingly require that a person's, a victim's, feeling-based account of their situation and of their capacity be respected and even taken as definitive. With this frame of reference, if someone feels 'This shouldn't have happened, my life is ruined, I'll never get over it,' then this has to be accepted as the functioning limit of their capacity.

The view of Buddhist dharma is very different. From this point of view everything that has ever occurred to me is my experience, it is part of my story, it is my life. I am implicated not merely as the person to whom these events have occurred but as a participant in them, and, due to karma, as the actual causal agent of them.

Due to ignorance, the on-going ignoring of how and why events manifest as they do, we invent our own interpretations and act as if they were the whole truth. I take myself to be real, substantial and enduring and I assume that the same is true for the people and objects I meet. This very solidity generates a sense of vulnerability for the forms of this precious body and mind can be easily hurt or destroyed. Therefore my safety seems to lie in being able to control events; to promote the aspects that favour me and keep at bay the aspects that do not.

Due to this self-protective activity I generate attitudes of hopes and fear and act in ways that support or hurt others – these attitudes and actions create the karmic momentum which gives rise to the specific particularities of our unfolding experience.

From this point of view there are no victims since whatever we encounter arises as the on-going unfolding of the interplay of cause and effect. An event acts as a cause – yet it had a precedent, it didn't arise just by itself.

Each cause is the consequence of a prior cause and its own consequences will also act as causes of other events. The field of experience is a vast matrix of interconnectivity – there are no fixed substantial entities, only moments of space and time, each linked to all other moments of space and time. This is not something that happens to us – it is how we are. We, moment by moment, are the centre of the field of experience; this moment is my experience. It is not created by some God, by another person, nor is it my own personal fantasy. There is no-one to blame, not even myself.

Rather than attempting to stand outside it and evaluate what is going on in terms of a particular interpretative schema the buddhist teaching indicates that we should relax into our groundless centrality, into our open presence, and work with circumstances. Circumstances are the dynamic interplay of the ungraspable transient revealing of shape, colour, sound, taste, touch, smell, thought, feeling etc. Reifying narratives and moralistic judgement do not help us to be where we actually are – in fact they distract us into a nowhere land of abstraction.

In dharma there are no victims, no bullies, no good people, no bad people – these are all extrapolated conclusions. Of course due to events, we are hurt or healed, happy or sad – these are transient experiences arising due to causes and conditions. They are not fixed states or definitions of self and other. If we drop the seductive habits of judgement, blaming, self-righteous innocence, helpless victimhood and so on, we will have space in which to awaken to our own invulnerable vajra presence and with this we can free ourselves and others from the painful delusion of duality, the actual cause of our suffering.

However, let us consider whether such a view of immediacy is unethical in not taking the 'reality' of individuals seriously. The actual present, the here and now which includes but is not defined by concepts, is

fresh and open, but only if it is apart from the three times, the interlinking of past, present and future. In the chain of cause and effect the past is part of the present and the present is part of the future.

Unless it is experienced as truly infinite, truly open and non-self-selective, each presenting moment is likely to be tainted by subtle editing, by an unconscious or implicit bias. If I imagine that I am open to the other 'as they are' yet am actually projecting my opinions and judgements on to them I will be deluding myself and them. To be non-judgemental involves letting go of the vast apparatus of evaluation which we have acquired.

Yet surely the capacity to evaluate the factors operating in a situation is necessary for us to formulate an ethical response? Is not a rounded sense of the other, a composite image of them built up through time, necessary if our actions and responses are to be relevant to the 'whole' of the other, rather than just the particular configuration of aspects that is manifesting now?

This is quite true if we start with the belief that self, other and the connection between them are facts which can be defined due to their inherently unitary nature: John is John, Mary is Mary and they can be known for who and what they are. Knowledge, information about someone, helps us to see them as they are. This is the view of duality. It is not the view of dharma. Non-duality is the view of dharma.

According to the basic dharma view all phenomena are impermanent and devoid of inherent self-nature. To cling to them as if they had an enduring defining essence is the cause of suffering. Therefore by looking clearly at how experience occurs we free ourselves of the fantasy that our world is composed of self-existing entities. We do this by dropping our reliance on interpretative signs and opening to the actuality that there are no graspable objects or subjects. Within this dream-like illusory apparition ethics is not about doing 'good' deeds and avoiding 'bad' deeds but of opening to the signless ungraspability of the other.

When we don't try to fit others into our interpretative matrix we let go of the violence of believing that we have the knowable 'truth'. This doesn't mean that anything goes. Rather our attention and presence is freed up so that we can respond directly to how the 'other' manifests with us now – ethics is the immediacy of relating, of offering one's availability to the other as they are. It is one's own shape which will alter in order to fit the other, free of any demand that they reciprocate.

If all aspects of the other are their potential then all are present always and are always potentially available. Our openness and hospitality free of demand is the factor most likely to awaken the other from their limiting preoccupation.

So what blinds us to this? The dyadic lock-on of mutually confirming positions where one self-state, one limited aspect, seeks confirmation by eliciting in the other a self-state which links to its own. Each confirms the other's validity by alignment, by complementarity. Thus fragments of each person interact to create small worlds of alignment each niched within the open world of potential and yet each with its seemingly separate existence identified on the basis of ignoring that open world. True immediacy is open to the open potential of the other and is not locked into the limited and limiting identification with self-states.

In this way immediacy is ethical while the limited states are not, for they offer the violence of the over-privileged delimitation. Such positioning offers them, at best, an alignment with a code of morality which is, in its imposition, a violence towards the phenomenal unfolding. This is the conflictual field within which accusing, blaming, bad-mouthing, stereotyping and all the other moods of deathly defining operate.

Being is free. Freedom is intrinsic, though it may be constrained by factors operating within it such as fear, status, the expectations of others. To be a victim is to experience a loss of freedom, freedom to be oneself and freedom to respond. Yet this freedom persists as our potential – it is not lost, merely not chosen. Something else was chosen: restriction, compromise, placation, collapse.

The field of experience is open, that is to say it is filled with factors which have an equal right to be there and an equal status as transient phenomena. This equal value is intrinsic, whatever relative functional values individuals may find themselves attributing, possessing or developing. To be a victim as an on-going status is a renunciation of that equal status, a status intrinsic to being. The relative imbalances of power influence situational identity – but not being itself