

Ten Reflections (3 of 10) Agency

April 24 2024

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

spiritual counseling, chaplaincy, freedom, oppression, empowerment, permission, reflection, parenting, reliable, peace

Gil Fronsdal

Welcome to the third talk on Ten Reflections for a Dharma Life. In fact, these ten reflections can be called “reflections for living a spiritual life,” because they are used for understanding others by people who offer spiritual counseling and chaplaincy. I find them very useful because they're really basic to our humanity. They do not just exist in the purview of Buddhism, but in the context of the teaching here, I offer them in relation to Buddhism.

For today and tomorrow, the topic is agency and autonomy. The positive corollary I associate with them is a sense of freedom. When we are free and have agency to engage, act, and do, and when we have a sense of autonomy in those actions, they come with a sense of freedom and capacity. If that's curtailed, people suffer a lot. They feel frustrated; they feel oppressed, held in check, and boxed in. They feel a sense of hopelessness and even helplessness.

Allowing people to discover a sense of agency – that they *can* do, they *can* make a difference, they *can* act, and they're not held in check – relates to two spiritual and human needs that people have: meaning and purpose. Once we have a real sense of what's most important for us – the most important things, values, intentions, and purposes for how we want to live our lives – then we need the ability to actually live that way. We need to not be held in check by inner forces in us – our fears, our resistance, our hesitations, our procrastination – or by the world around us. Some people live in the oppression of war, the oppression of racism, poverty, and lack of educational or work opportunities. There are all kinds of ways in which people feel like they can't engage. So they need to discover a sense of agency and be empowered to act.

In some schools of Buddhism, they do empowerment ceremonies for people. We don't do that in our tradition, but maybe we should. Sometimes people don't feel like they have the ability, the permission, or the capacity to engage in certain kinds of practices, certain ways of living, and holding certain values. On their own, they can't do it. But if they're given permission, if someone believes in them, if someone champions them, supports them, and has their back as they do it, they might feel, “Now I can do it. I can step into what's challenging and scary for me.” It is phenomenally useful and important to empower, affirm, and encourage people.

As you consider your own agency, do you feel like you're an agent of your own destiny? Do you feel that you have some choice in the ability to act, in ways that are important and valuable for you and feel like an expression of being free? Do you feel free to live the deepest values and possibilities you have?

We need to understand where we have agency and where we don't. We need to know which is a realistic, healthy agency, and which are unhealthy ideas of agency: ideas of agency that are caught up in

greed, hatred, and wanting to act from those very negative unwholesome impulses. We need to know it's unhealthy to feel, "I want to be free just to be angry; I want to be free just to get whatever I want." That is a certain kind of freedom but at the cost of hurting other people. It is only an external freedom. It's not an internal freedom. In fact, if we're caught up in greed and hatred, something inside of us has been frozen. Something inside of us has stopped, is covered over, or is lost: our sense of agency from the deepest place of well-being in our hearts and minds. It feels so good to discover through meditation this place of deep abiding value: a sense of reflection, intimacy, peace, wisdom, and creativity. Then we discover that this can flow out of us into what we do. We don't prevent what is healthy within us from coming forth. We don't inhibit ourselves from speaking what feels true. We speak the truth, if necessary, but do so without being caught in fear, hatred, or greed. We do it from a deep sense of inner freedom.

In Buddhism, agency has a lot to do with the inner freedom that we can have even when the world around us oppresses us. That is unfortunate and something that we should work to overcome, but we can't always do it completely. But even in the midst of the challenges and limitations life puts on us through illness and loss and all kinds of things, it is still possible to find agency with ourselves. We can find our own freedom from the ways in which we dampen ourselves down, limit ourselves, close down, or get contracted, all of which we do when we are operating from greed, hatred, and excessive anxiety.

We can discover the deeper wellsprings within and the freedom for them to flow out of us in spite of the external limitations that somehow we have to live in. Sometimes maybe we have no choice but to live certain ways. I don't know if this is an appropriate example of this, but I became a parent late in life after living in monasteries for years where there were a lot of limitations. I was surprised that parenting young children was phenomenally limiting on sleep and self-care and all kinds of things. There were limitations I had to live with. I had to take care of these children at the expense of being free to do all kinds of other things that I was used to doing in my life. But it was invaluable for me to grapple with this because I could work through the layers inside to find that deeper place of freedom where agency had returned – the agency to be free amid limitations, and the agency to engage choice-fully and wisely with life as it was given to me, as opposed to how I wanted it to be different.

In the wake of reflecting on meaning and purpose, look deeply into the question of what your sense of agency is. Do you feel like you have agency in your life? Where do you feel like you don't have it? Where are you held in check, and where you are limited? Where can you find agency? Where can you find empowerment, maybe self-empowerment, so you are not held in check, in resistance, or in procrastination, so that you can step forward and set something free? This doesn't mean setting something free that is crazy or is going to harm others or yourself. We do have oddities in our minds and hearts – desires, wishes, fantasies, and delusions about what goes on.

What is reliable? What's a reliable source of agency within that allows us to feel free, creative, intelligent, and wise? One characteristic of this is that a profound sense of peace is part of it. A profound sense of goodwill and respect comes from the deep wellspring where spiritual freedom lives within us.

If you're inclined at all, agency is the theme for reflection for the next 24 hours. How does that work for you? Is there another word that you would rather use than "agency" that speaks to this topic better? Maybe it is simply the phrases "freedom to act," or "freedom to live from our deepest values". But maybe you have a different phrase that is useful for you to reflect on this. And where do you not have a sense of agency? Where do you feel in check? Where would it be useful for you to discover greater freedom and agency, be empowered or self-empowered, or have someone who believes in you tell you, "Yes, you can do this. It's okay."?

Tomorrow I'll talk about autonomy. That raises the interesting question of whether some of these teachings of meaning, purpose, and agency rub against the Buddhist teachings of not-self. Isn't the idea of autonomy a little bit opposed to those teachings? I would like to say not, but we'll save that for tomorrow. Thank you very much. May you have a day of discovering greater freedom in your life.