

Freedom and Choice

Breaking free from the tyranny of reaction

By [Ken McLeod](#)



A few years ago, I was teaching a workshop on the *Heart Sutra*. We had just finished that long list of negations and everyone was a bit off balance, having had the rug pulled out from under them four or five different ways. The next lines were “Because for bodhisattvas there is no attainment, they rest, trusting the perfection of wisdom.”

“When he reaches the perfection of wisdom, can a bodhisattva choose to do whatever he wants?” a young man asked.

“The illusion of choice is an indication of a lack of freedom,” I replied. He looked at me, stunned, then turned around and gently banged his head against the wall as he said, “Now my head really hurts.”

Most people equate choice and freedom. It seems so reasonable. Freedom means you are free to choose, right? It means you are free from restrictions. If you can't choose, then you are not free. And it would seem to follow that the more choice you have, the more freedom you have.

But it doesn't work out that way.

The more options you have, the more energy you have to invest in making decisions. Which shampoo? Which car? Which dress? Which restaurant? Which movie? Your energy and attention are consumed by these decisions, and you have less left with which to live your life. I recently met a young entrepreneur who had reduced the number of items he owned to 15 (including clothes, just one pair of jeans). His aim was to reduce choice in his daily routine so that he could focus his attention on his business. It reminded me that during my three-year retreat, I had only two sets of clothes. The aim was the same: to reduce choice so that I could focus attention on meditation practice.

Many people deliberately eliminate choice and the need for decisions by adopting set schedules. They conserve energy for important rather than routine decisions. Research into consumer behavior shows that people are more likely to buy devices with more options, but they are less likely to use them because it takes too long to figure out how to do even the simplest task.

What does choice give you? One answer is that choice makes it possible for you to shape your world according to your preferences. All this does is to enable you to fashion a world that is an extension of your own patterns. With modern technology, you can weave a cocoon of your preferences and rarely run into anything that contradicts them. Google now keys its searches to fit your online behavior, further cocooning you in your own world. In other words, too much choice is a trap. You end up isolated from the richness and complexity of life.

Choice is a dubious blessing when it comes to spiritual practice—in fact, when it comes to any creative endeavor. Great art is often the result of restriction in form, in materials, in themes. The restrictions concentrate attention and spur creativity. It is the same in practice. How do you increase your capacity in paying attention? By eliminating all choice. One posture. One object. Rest right there. No choice. And, as all of us know, it's not easy.

The lack of choice brings you directly into contact with the way you habitually ignore, shut down, manipulate, or control your experience. When you have no choice, you have to learn how to relate to what life brings you. You can't weave a comfortable cocoon. On the other hand, by restricting your choice of actions, you can develop an internal discipline of not reacting. This is why moral discipline was traditionally seen as the basis for meditation practice.

When I look at my own path, once I started to study with Kalu Rinpoche, I didn't have much choice. Tradition and instruction took over. Learn Tibetan, do these practices, then this practice, and so on. The three-year retreat was the same, one practice after another. No choice. Because of those restrictions, I couldn't avoid my own emotional material. It came out in quite brutal ways.

By the time I left retreat, all doors to practice were closed for me in the tradition in which I had originally trained. Yet something else had formed—a firm, way-seeking mind, to use Suzuki

Roshi's phrase. In the years since, I have come to appreciate that a firm, way-seeking mind is the most important quality to cultivate. With it, you are able to work through any obstacle. I simply don't see how you can develop that if you can choose just what fits with you.

One of the functions of monasteries, retreats, ethical codes, and other structures associated with spiritual practice is to eliminate choice. When people attend the relatively strict discipline at Tassajara Zen Center, for instance, they come away feeling rejuvenated and refreshed, precisely because they have had no choice for a few days. They feel free, alive, awake in a way that they don't in their regular lives. Prisoners who take up a meditation practice have reported that by restricting their range of actions even beyond the limitations of prison and just sitting in meditation, they find a freedom they never suspected was possible.

What is freedom? It is the moment-by-moment experience of not being run by one's own reactive mechanisms. Does that give you more choice? Usually not. When you aren't run by reactions, you see things more clearly, and there is usually only one, possibly two courses of action that are actually viable. Freedom from the tyranny of reaction leads to a way of experiencing life that leaves you with little else to do but take the direction that life offers you in each moment. Hence, the illusion of choice is an indication of a lack of freedom.

*[Ken McLeod](http://unfetteredmind.org) is the founder of Unfettered Mind (unfetteredmind.org). A teacher, translator, writer, and business consultant, he is the author of several books including *Reflections on Silver River* and *A Trackless Path*. He currently lives in Sonoma County, California, where he writes, hikes and explores the mysteries of clay.*