

Martin Alyward
The Realm of Choice
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Our life seems to be composed of an endless, near constant series of choice points. Many times each day, we're confronted even in a very simple way. "What shall I wear? What do I want to eat? What am I doing at what time and with whom?"

Whether those are small, seemingly inconsequential decisions, or whether they're the bigger themes of life, when it comes to the work I do and some kind of career opportunity, or the partner I'm with, and whether to commit to somebody, or whether to leave somebody, or the ways we spend our time.

Decisions and Their Charge

There's a charge that goes along with decision-making, and of course, the more seemingly consequential the decision we make, the greater the charge is, as we equate with the decision, the greater sense of the importance of getting it right, making the right decision.

So we can see that sense of choice operating across all these different areas and realms of our life, and we can also see it operating across different time realms, the three fields of time: past, present and future.

We might just be deciding in the present, what shall I do now? What do I want? And making choices about how I orient or pivot. Where do I put my attention? Where do I put my interest? Where do I put my energy from one moment to another?

The Tendency to Predict Outcomes

And then we also tend to look forward in terms of choice and decision, in terms of the import of my decision. What will happen if I do this? What will be the outflows? And even though we know very well that the future is uncertain, it doesn't seem to stop us from imagining that we can predict or anticipate the outcome.

And of course, in a very ordinary sense, we can. If I put on a woolen sweater now, I'll probably be too hot in half an hour. But actually, we tend to put that sort of simplistic, mechanistic "doing this causes that" onto the situations in our life stretching forward, where we can really have no idea of how things will pan out.

Often the truth is that I've no idea what will happen tomorrow, I've no idea what will be the consequences of going left or going right in this juncture I find myself at, that truth reminds us that our life is out of our hands, in some way, out of our control.

In many ways, we tend to use that anticipating of future results, anticipating of future outcomes, as a kind of security blanket, as a way of making myself feel better about life, or feel more control, feel a greater sense of agency, like I'm in charge of these things I decide to do X or Y.

And then we also do the same thing in relation to the past, often replaying seeming decisions that we've made and maybe worrying about whether we made the right or wrong decision. Maybe indulging in some kind of imaginary ideas of what could have or would have happened had we made a different decision. Even though, of course, there's no way to go back and know any of that with any certainty.

Contemplating Your Relationship to Choice

So here is the realm of choice playing out in different areas of our life, playing out with different intensity, banal, simple decisions, or seemingly significant life altering decisions and playing out over the fields of time. And also playing out with different flavors.

So just as you're listening to this, give a little thought. What's your relationship to choice, to decision, in general? For example, is the relationship to choice, one wherein you feel a sense of excitement and possibility, maybe where you feel a sense of ownership and agency? Or would you say the relationship to choice is more one that's fraught with a sense of difficulty, maybe even overwhelm, worry or anxiety about getting it right, worry about what could go wrong if you make the so-called "wrong decision."

Or another relationship you might have to it might just be one of feeling frozen. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know what to do. Some people spend a lot of time feeling indecisive, and therefore get a lot of energy caught up in that being indecisive.

So most of what you'll find might be in one of those three areas: excitement or fear, agitation or frozen overwhelm. Or we could also evoke the fourth possibility of a sense of inhabiting choice in a way that's mysterious. Where we're not rejecting the sense of possibility that can arise in this moment, this pregnant moment, which will give birth to the next moment in some way. But we're also not really believing in the rhetoric of our agency. And that's a little bit the direction I'd like to point us into, one where we're freed from what I'll dare to call here the illusion of choice.

Bear with me if that's a difficult phrase to hear, where we're free from the illusion of choice, but without swinging to some other extreme where everything becomes mechanistic or deterministic.

And we'll do that not by means of trying to debate the metaphysics of it, but in a way of looking at our own experience, opening up and to some extent, deconstructing our own experience.

Deconstructing Our Experience With Choice

So let me ask you that question again, having explored these different types of relationships: what would you say is your style or your flavor when it comes to making decisions, when it comes to the influence and the importance of choices?

Sometimes we just know. Somebody asks, "Do you want this, or do you want that? Shall we do this, or shall we do that?" And it's just immediately clearly obvious that one possibility is more attractive or maybe more pleasant, or maybe more easy, or maybe more rewarding, or something than the other. And so off we go.

Later on we might say, "Well, this morning, the person asked me what to do, and we decided to do that." And as soon as you have that, "I decided to go there," that makes me sound very clear and powerful, right? I've got the power of decision, I decided.

But if we go back and look at what happened, is that really a decision? There's the influencing factors from around us, whatever's going on in the day and might be even as to what the weather's like, sunny weather might incite one choice.

There's also the inner factors, where we've got a lifetime of conditioning and we've got a lifetime of prior experiences that are constantly suggesting to us, some sense of attraction towards, or fear of, or ambivalence about. And if you're present, if you're in the contemplative frame of mind that we cultivate through dharma practice, if we're in touch with some of the clarity that we're building through meditation, that can slow down or magnify your thought processes so you can see more of what's happening.

And rather than just "Here's an option and I choose it," or "Here are two options, and I choose that one," we actually start to recognize the process of options come in the form of just sense data, just like sights come to the eyes, sounds come to the ears. In this case, a voice in the form of a question or a choice has come to us, and we notice, we receive that. And a bunch of internal processes happen often, quite quickly, but they involve just the pleasure pain response.

We're looking for that which will be either, you know, good or pleasant, or rewarding. And then we may have all kinds of associations. Those associations aren't arising as choice. They're arising from our conditioning. They're arising as already integrated experiences, responses, reactions. And out of that we say yes or no, or this one or that one.

Depersonalizing Choice

So even there, when the so-called choice seems easy and obvious and emphatic, we step back and it starts to appear rather less personal. It's rather less of me in it. Maybe it's more accurate to say my conditioning made the choice for me, rather than I made the choice. So we're sort of deconstructing choice, but we're also pointing to this fundamental aspect of Buddhadharma, where the I/me/mine that seems so central to our experience, when we start to examine it loses a little bit of its centrality. Let's take another example where we don't know so easily.

So some things, I hear the option and I know, and then later I say, "I decided." But actually, like we say, we respond to the influencing factors in the moment, and then in another choice. Would you like to do this? Or would you like to do that? Should you take this job offer or that job offer? Should you stay with your partner or leave them?

Some people, if you ask them, "Would you like a glass of water or a glass of juice?" they need a long time. "Oh, well, I don't know. Maybe the water would be more hydrating, but the juice would be more tasty." So whether it's a small thing or a much more consequential thing, sometimes, and for some of us, this can be really a big pattern, we feel caught in indecision. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know what to do.

It's amazing how often people will come to me with what they're calling a dilemma, or they'll say, "I have a decision to make," and then they'll tell me the features of the decision, because maybe they're thinking I can help them.

But in a way, the help I'm most interested in providing to them isn't which decision to make. It's to come back and look at that very construct in the middle, in the center of it all, "I've got a decision to make." I always feel like a synonymous sentence for "I've got a decision to make," would be "I'm very busy and important." That's the feeling of it. Oh yes, I've got a decision to make. So let's start with what's just true.

I don't know. Sometimes that is what's true. Here's option A, here's option B. I don't know which one I want to follow, if I have the choice, and I don't know how they'll turn out. And even though I can speculate and ruminate on the various possibilities, I still don't know.

The invitation, I would say, is to become comfortable with the not knowing, and that's very unusual or dystonic for us. What is uncomfortable about "I don't know" is the thought that I *should* know. And why should I know?

Well, partly because it has this seeming import on my life, but also when I feel like I know, I decide, I choose, then that sense of central me, reliable me, secure me, is back in the middle of

the frame. When I don't know, I feel all at sea, disempowered. But maybe there's something important, something potent in not knowing.

The Liberation of Not Knowing

I would say it's a very valuable, clarifying, liberating practice when you don't know. To dare to slow down, sense a little and acknowledge, I don't know. To get comfortable with I don't know. To move from, I don't know, because I should know, I must know, to I don't know. I just don't know. I don't know is a feel of a true, relaxed, wide open. I don't know is a kind of scintillating feel. I don't know.

Maybe this is counterintuitive, but it actually frees us from the burden of having to know, thinking I should know. The objection, of course, will come along "But at some point, I have to know. At some point I need to make the decision." Yes, but if you let yourself not know, at some point, you will definitely know, or you will definitely act.

Often we say, I need to know, I need to know. Maybe we don't need to know yet. You can just rest in "I don't know." When you're actually confronted to the moment you have to act, you'll act.

And the evidence of that is every single previous moment of your entire life until now. As I say retrospectively, I decided, but actually we responded or reacted. So what happens now when we say, "I don't know, but I think I should." It's the same thing.

There's these various influencing factors, outer and inner. There's attraction and fear maybe going on. And rather than I don't know what to choose, and then I decided what to choose, maybe we can sense in and recognize that actually it's more like I feel incapable of tolerating the discomfort of I don't know and the feeling of disempowerment or disorientation in that, that I thrash around a little in that state of not knowing, until I seize upon one of those options, and I say, okay that. And that seizing upon is mostly motivated by attraction or fear. And then later on, we said, "Oh, well, I decided in the end, I thought about it for a while, and then I decided that."

Remaining Open to Possibility

So the encouragement with all of this is really to be open. Open to possibility. Open to not knowing. Open to the way influencing factors affect us and open to the responses that we make. And it could be, and it's certainly been my experience in really exploring this territory, that the process and the practice and the liberation that goes on in that is freeing us up from the sense, the burden, the responsibility that I'm one who has to decide to a kind of more fluid feel where, oh, here are these influencing factors, and here are the responses that I make.

I'm more aware of where those responses are coming from. I'm more in touch with the different factors. The feeling of a kind of dancing with life is there, rather than the sense of pressure or responsibility.

And then we have this relationship which is beautifully characterized by the words of the famous mystic baseball player, Yogi Barra. He says, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it."