

# Ten Reflections (4 of 10) Autonomy

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Hello, and welcome to the fourth of the ten reflections in this series. The fourth one is autonomy. To review them, the first talk was on meaning, then purpose, and yesterday's talk was on a sense of agency. With meaning and purpose, it makes sense to act in the world. An essential human need is to have the ability and the agency to act according to our values, our sense of purpose, and what's important to us. When our sense of agency is inhibited, broken, made difficult, or denied, it's profoundly difficult for human beings.

Supporting people in their agency and empowerment is one of the gifts that we can offer others. We can do this by believing in people and having confidence in them. Some people grew up without anyone believing in them, in their capacity and their ability.

The fourth skill is autonomy. Autonomy is very important in hospitals. Doctors are constantly supposed to think about how to respect the autonomy of the patient, meaning their ability to make decisions for themselves. I think we have a profound need to feel that we have a choice and that our choice will not be taken away from us by others who choose for us. We also need to not be limited and oppressed by other people's choices. We need to be respected for our ability to make a choice, and our ability to do things for ourselves.

Thinking about this, I think about growing up from birth to old age. Before we were born, when we were gestating in our mother, everything was done for us. But when we are born, we start breathing for ourselves, and soon thereafter we start digesting food for ourselves. Then slowly, as we grow up we're able to do more and more things for ourselves. We're able to sit up, stand up, walk by ourselves, and get around without someone having to carry us. At some point, we're able to go to the bathroom by ourselves, clean ourselves, and shower ourselves. At some point, we're able to use forks and spoons by ourselves and feed ourselves. At some point, we're able to take the bus by ourselves, to school, for example, or go to the store by ourselves, or walk down the street to our friend's house without someone accompanying us.

In the slow process of growing up, there is greater and greater autonomy and we do more things for ourselves. Something profoundly problematic happens if the growth of autonomy and doing things for ourselves is curtailed as we grow up. Some people are not given a chance to grow up because there are people who constantly do things for them, take care of everything for them, and protect them. They can't go out and experience the possibility of finding their own way in the world.

Healthy growing up involves a greater and greater capacity for autonomy, until finally, at least in modern society, we leave home, go off, and start our own home someplace else. First, we might move away from our parents and go to college. One of the milestones of growing a sense of autonomy is maybe when our parents can't take care of themselves and we have the strength, ability, and autonomy to be the one who cares for them.

When we're dying, some people find it's wonderful to have loved ones around. Some people prefer to die alone. But dying is a profoundly personal thing that we go through. We want to have grown and developed, over the course of a lifetime, the capacity to enter into the dying process with a very healthy sense of, "This is just me. This is my process." And we want to be able to follow through with some confidence, letting go, and clarity.

So discovering and having autonomy is really important. There are things we cannot expect other people to do for us. Unless we're sick, we generally don't ask other people to shower us, pee for us, or all kinds of things. Some things we have to do ourselves. There's a profound human need for autonomy. When we don't have it, it's a problem. How to have a healthy sense of autonomy is a very important thing to reflect on and explore.

It gets complicated in some subcultures of the United States where individualism has a lot to do with self-assertion – building and asserting a self. Spiritual freedom is confused with the freedom to assert our desires, get what we want, seize the day, be ourselves, assert ourselves on social media, and be someone for others. There are so many ways that the freedom to do that is actually harmful to the people who are doing it. It reinforces something unwholesome – attachment, clinging, delusion, even fantasy sometimes.

So the strong need for autonomy sometimes gets confused with the strong impulse to get our desires and attachments met and to assert ourselves in some way. In Buddhism, autonomy is not about self-assertion. It's very different. It is something very profound: not interfering, not grasping onto, not adding pressure, or judgments, or ideas of right and wrong. It is about allowing each thing that arises to arise freely without feeding it, without getting involved in it, and without fueling it.

When we discover this kind of autonomy, we can give autonomy to each thing that arises. We become the giver of autonomy, not the taker of autonomy. We have a certain autonomy because we are free. We don't resist anything, we don't hold onto anything, we're not pushing anything away. We're more like open space, where things can just go right through. Nothing lands on our identity. Nothing lands on the sense of self we've built up or hold onto. We can still be completely who we are, and in some ways, you could say we can be more fully who we are when we're not trying to build and assert who we are.

To find this profound place of autonomy, a kind of freedom from other people's projections, judgments, and prejudice. Finding an inner place where we're free from that is a powerful way of, not exactly fighting what people do to us, but not giving into that and not participating in it. In that way, we can stand against others' projections. We don't give in to what other people are pushing on us or demanding of us, but we also don't need to assert ourselves in that process. We can just have confidence in our capacity to be free in that moment.

We can discover a kind of autonomy that is non-resistance, non-clinging, and non-assertion. This is beautiful because we can be fully who we are, but at the same time, we don't have to be anybody. We can be space for all things without being in conflict with anything. We can have non-contention.

I'm offering you my reflections on this. I'm not saying that this is the best way for everyone to understand the concepts I'm offering. Today I'm not suggesting this is the best way to understand the idea of freedom and autonomy. But I want to give you just enough orientation around the topic of autonomy for you to be able to grapple with it yourself. You can consider and explore for yourself what autonomy might mean for you. You might come up with a different word related to autonomy, a synonym that may be more meaningful for you.

But I think it's a very significant concept to reflect on for yourself and see how this works. What's your autonomy like? Do you feel you don't have autonomy, choice, agency, these kinds of things? Where do you feel that it's good to have some sense of independence? To say this subtly differently, in Buddhist language, rather than "independence," Buddhism talks about "non-dependence." Where do you have a place of non-dependence on anything? The subtle difference is that sometimes in America independence can be interpreted as self-assertion – we are independent enough to assert ourselves. But "non-dependence" means that we're free.

Autonomy is one of three or four central ethical principles in American medical practice. It's also a very important concept in our society as a whole. So I think it's well worth grappling with and considering this topic. An important follow-up of the idea of agency is having autonomy in our ability to act as we think is necessary and important for us. Autonomy to practice the Dharma.

Maybe you'll reflect on this in different ways today, including talking to friends about it. Then we'll continue tomorrow with what follows from this, which is the concept of identity. That is a bit of a hot topic for Buddhists. So we'll see how that goes. I wish you well with your reflections. Thank you.