

Chaos Theory, Free Will and Buddhism

Have you ever heard the question about destiny versus unknown futures? Destiny proposes that everything is planned and all our lives are pre-ordained to every detail including our decisions and ultimate death. The unknown future group is largely invented by the destiny people who propose that the only other option is a life on complete bewilderment and confusion where serendipity and chance are the only forces at work in our lives. Often times, Chaos theory is understood as the poster child for the serendipity option with its attendant hopelessness. This is a gross misunderstanding of Chaos theory though, born of its unfortunate name and lack of research on the user's part.

To put it into everyday terms one might consider the way humans make decisions. When struggling with a decision, we generally weigh possible outcomes or effects of a decision on our lives, those around us, or the situation at hand. When we finally make a decision and move forward with it, we believe we have chosen the best of the choices we had before us. But, how often do we consider the weather, the temperature in the room, our current state of mind, the day of the week, the country we live in, the deeply inculcated emotions and cultural influences in our lives and on and on...? Simply put, there are so many variables in our decision making process that we fail to consider, that the ultimate "decision" is really just a stab in the dark, which we might reverse or totally contradict with an ensuing decision. This is more like the situation that chaos theory proposes. It is NOT that we have no part in the directions and possibilities in our lives, but instead, that we are actively and constantly in a position to influence our life path. Influence becomes a key term here. Just as when we remain friends with a person who habitually steals. After repeatedly witnessing this friend's thefts, we begin to be influenced by our empathy for the friend and justify occasional theft until we find ourselves stealing from time to time. This is why we must be diligent in our observations of the influences around us and choose those influential environments and people very carefully.

All this seems to imply that the idea of a totally "free will" is an oversimplification or even an impossibility. But free will is simply the opportunity to make choices for one's own life. The critical thing to remember again is the operative word "influence". Our decisions may not manifest as we might have imagined, but the decision is one in a very long and complex string of decisions that do influence our life path. This is why large life goals are so important. Without a larger life goal to guide our decision making, we are left to struggle with decisions in the moment only. As complex and cumulative as the decision process is in our lives, this can result in haphazard decision making

that addresses only the present desires of the moment without the vision to apply future and long term effects. The result is a meandering life path often filled with grief and confusion.

In Buddhism, our life goal is to be free of the suffering brought about by our unreasonable attachments as the result of our desires. To do this requires great diligence in the monitoring of our minds and our decision making process. This takes determination and effort, to catch our mind in the act of making rash or unconsidered decisions before they are acted upon and to recognize the root influences that bring these “bad” decisions or influences into our mind. Buddhism is more like a science in this respect as we analyze deeply the conditions and the tendencies that influence our daily life. By understanding and appeasing these influences over time and replacing those influences with a more conscious and informed consideration we become calmer, more secure, less threatened and more compassionate toward others due to our own deeper understanding of the influence mechanisms ruling human beings. In simple terms, Buddhism is behavior modification based on our own observations with a goal toward happiness and calmness or peace in our lives. By extension of course we become better influences to those around us as a benefit to ourselves and the society we live in. In Buddhism this is the Bodhisattva way. This is also a beautiful example of the use of free will. By using our personal volition to influence and modify our lives for a better life condition and influence of those around us.

Love and Respect,

Sifu Sylvain Chamberlain

Abbot, Threefold Lotus Kwoon