

Potentials for Good

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There's a slogan that sometimes you hear floating around Buddhist circles: that if you want to see a person's past actions, you look at their current condition; if you want to see their future condition, you look at their current actions. But that's not true. There's a lot more to a person than you can see in the present moment. That slogan seems to think that we have a single karma account and what you see right now is the running balance.

But in the Buddha's image, karma's more like a field full of seeds. What you see right now are the seeds that are sprouting. But there can be lots of other seeds in the field that you don't see at all. They're ready to sprout or they're just lying dormant. Which means that when you see somebody suffering, or see somebody doing something that could lead to suffering, you don't just say, "Well, that's their past karma," and leave it at that. The same when you look at yourself: You don't say, "All I've got is the karma I see right now." If we're born as human beings, we have good and bad seeds in our field. We're creating new seeds all the time. So we want to create as many good seeds as we can, but at the same time we also want to encourage the good seeds from the past. Because it is possible for them to crowd out the bad seeds, just as it is possible for the bad seeds to crowd out the good. Which means that when we look at ourselves, we're going to look at our potential for goodness.

As Ajaan Lee points out, if you focus on your potential for being bad or focusing simply on your bad points, it pulls you down. And once you pull yourself down this way, it's all too easy to spread out and focus on other people's bad points as well, which means you don't see their potential for good. That discourages *your* potential for good, and so those potentials just get wasted.

So which seeds do you want to water? You want to water the good ones. Which means you have to believe firmly in your potential to do good—and to believe firmly in other people's potential as well.

When Ajaan Lee made those comments, he was talking about one of the forms of right resolve, which is to be resolved on harmlessness. You don't focus on your bad points; you don't focus on other people's bad points. You try to focus on the good points. When you see somebody suffering, you focus on the potentials they have to become skillful, so that they don't have to suffer from their bad karma.

Then you learn how to look the same way at yourself. Of course, the more you look at yourself this way, the easier it is to look at other people in this way. So

karma's not simply teaching us that we get what we deserve. It's more teaching us that there is a way out. Because the Buddha's teaching an end to suffering, whether it's "deserved" or not.

Think of the story of Angulimala. He'd killed all those people but then had a huge change of heart. The Buddha saw that potential. Nobody else saw the potential, but the Buddha saw it and was able to bring it out. Angulimala became an arahant. And as you can imagine, there were some people who were not happy with this. There were people whose relatives he'd killed. They wanted to see him get what he "deserved." But the Buddha's compassion was different. He saw that this person had the potential. There was some hidden goodness in him, and the Buddha was able to bring it out.

So Angulimala was able to avoid a lot of suffering. The worst that happened to him was that when he was on his almsround, people would throw things at him. He came back one day, blood running down his head from something somebody had thrown at his head, and the Buddha said, "Bear up with it! It could have been a lot worse."

So when you look at yourself and look at other people, remember, there's a potential for goodness there. And compassion is a matter of looking for that potential for goodness and saying to yourself, "If there's something I can do to help, I'd be happy to help." If there's nothing you can do, at least you don't get in the way.

This doesn't mean that we don't see that other people have their bad side as well. We take that into account, for our own safety, but we focus on the potential for good. Because that allows us to focus on *our* potential for good as well.

Like we're sitting here right now: You could focus on parts of the body that are in pain and you could focus on them in a way that's really going to exacerbate the pain, make it worse. Or you could focus on your potentials for pleasure. You've got the choice.

That's what the teaching of karma's all about: There are choices here. And the complexity of karma is what gives us our hope, that even though some bad things may be coming up in the mind right now, there's also a potential for goodness in their someplace. There are the seeds that have been planted someplace. So you want to look for those.

Right now the body has a mixture of pleasant feelings and painful feelings. Focus on the pleasant ones. Notice where you can feel a sense of pleasure as you breathe in. When you breathe in, which part of the body seems to be feeding most off of the breath, gaining the most energy? Focus there. As for the parts of the body that can't be made pleasant right now, just leave them alone. Focus on the

areas where you *can* make it good. And from just ordinary good it can also become really, really good. You can have a sense of refreshment, rapture even, a sense of ease and well-being simply by the way you breathe.

Ajaan Lee talks how we have lots of potentials in us—in our bodies, in our minds—and yet for the most part, we don't use them, don't get the best use out of them, because our minds are not focused. When you can bring the mind to a focus on the pleasant parts, and focus in a way that encourages them, that strengthens you. You begin to see that what the Buddha said is really true: There are potentials here that you've just ignored, haven't made use of. You've been letting them go to waste. But you have the choice: Will you continue to let them go to waste or are you going to make something good out of them?

Once that sense of pleasure gets solid, then you can think of spreading it through the painful parts. Think of it as a breath energy that can penetrate even walls. It goes right through whatever wall of pain may be in your knee, in your hip, in your back. If it's in your head, think of the breath energy coming up through the neck and also going down through the neck. In some cases, it feels best to think of it coming up from the back, over the top and then down through the throat. Other times it comes up through the throat, over the head then down the back. See what you need right now, or what works best for you right now.

When pleasure comes up, allow yourself to enjoy it. Don't lose the focus on your breath, just let the pleasure do its work. And don't get tied up in issues of whether you deserve the pleasure or not. It's a potential we all have. Make the most of it, because it puts your mind in a better mood. It's easier to settle down. When it's easier to settle down, it's easier to think clearly about what you're going to do, what you're going to say, what the most compassionate thing to do and say would be, the most harmless thing to do and say would be. The texts combine those two: harmlessness and compassion.

Sometimes it doesn't involve much at all: Just leave other people alone, let them have some peace. Other times, there may be something actively you can do to help them. And in doing that, you help yourself, too.

As the Buddha says, when you develop patience, equanimity, kindness, and goodwill, even though these qualities may be focused on other people and your relationship with them, your mind benefits as well. In other words, you protect other people through your patience, you protect other people through your equanimity, your goodwill and your sympathy, your kindness, and you protect yourself as well. You're protecting yourself from doing unskillful things and you're also strengthening good qualities in your own mind.

Similarly as you do the practice: As you focus on establishing mindfulness and

getting the mind concentrated, you're protecting yourself and, in doing that, you're helping other people at the same time.

Remember the Buddha's image of the acrobats. If you can maintain your balance, it's easier for the other people standing on your shoulder, or whose shoulders you're standing on, to maintain their balance as well. So the way you treat others is the way you treat yourself; the way you treat yourself is the way you treat others. So treat yourself well.

Look for the goodness within you. Don't harm yourself by focusing on the bad. As the teaching on karma tells us, that potential is there. But if it's just sitting there and you're not making the most of it, it's a huge waste. You did all that goodness sometime in the past and now you're just letting it go to waste. So remind yourself, you've got that goodness. Focus on it. Focus on the goodness of other people, too. These two focal points help each other along, so you can actually live in a really harmless way.

That's what Angulimala's original name was, Ahimsaka: the Harmless One. As for how he got started in his life of crime, there are lots of different theories. But that name was there, as a sign that there was the potential.

So focus on that harmless potential within yourself and within other people, and life gets a lot better.