

Potentials

August 27, 2020

Direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate it. You'll notice when you're evaluating it that you're not simply saying that this is the way it is, passing judgment, and leaving it there. You're also evaluating what can be done with it. If it's not comfortable, what can you do to make it comfortable? How can you maintain that sense of comfort and spread it around? There is a potential for comfort here in the breath. There's a potential for rapture and fullness. It may be hidden, but it's there. And just because it doesn't show itself right now doesn't mean that it's not there.

One of the knowledges attributed to the Buddha was his knowledge of properties. The word for "property" —*dhātu* in Pali—can also mean "potential." He could see the potentials in the world, everything from physical potentials such as the potentials for fire, for water, earth, wind, the potential for space, all the way to mental potentials, like the potential for consciousness. There are potentials in the mind, like the potential for sensuality. It may lie latent, but it doesn't take much to provoke it. And it's the fact that we have these potentials, both good and bad, that allows us to practice.

You probably know the passage where the Buddha says that you look at form, feeling, perception, fabrication and consciousness, and you ask yourself: Are they under your control? Can you have them be the way you want them to be? The answer is "partially." Most people tend to think there's nothing you can do about them at all. You've just got to accept the way they are and leave them there. But the Buddha's acceptance was not that kind of acceptance. You accept them, including their potentials. That means you can do something with them. It's simply a matter of figuring out what.

After all, even though the aggregates are not fully under control, still as the Buddha said, if people couldn't develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful qualities, there would have been no point to his teaching. So we *can* do something with our body. We *can* do something with our feelings, with our perceptions, with thought fabrications, and with consciousness. That's how we create the path: looking for the potentials we have here and developing them.

So wisdom isn't simply a matter of accepting things. It's seeing potentials and learning how to develop them in the proper way. There are some potentials like the potential for sensuality: That's something you've got to learn how to get rid of. But there are also good potentials in the mind. Those are the things you want to

develop. There's a good potential here in the body. As I said, you can breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture. How do you do that? Well, look at the way you breathe.

When you breathe out, are you squeezing the breath out? If so, you're stepping all over the potential for fullness. You can breathe in with a sense of fullness, so try to maintain the sense of fullness even as you breathe out. You begin to realize the fullness is not so much the fullness of the lungs; it's the fullness of the blood vessels and the sense of fullness in the energy of the nerves. Make sure you don't squeeze that. Allow that to stay full from one breath to the next to the next, and it builds up. It's as if a second system of breathing kicks in, the breathing of the nerves and the breathing of the blood vessels. If you learn how to tap into that, you create a sense of fullness very quickly.

That should teach you other lessons: There are other potentials in the mind and other potentials in the body. You want to look for them. When we're meditating, on the one hand we're looking at what we've already got, but we're also trying to make something out of it. What we've got here has potential, so learn to look at it in that way.

Someone contacted me recently and wanted me to do a Zoom meeting with some people in Singapore. The person sending the email complained that with the other ajaans they'd had on these Zoom meetings, all they could talk about was the three characteristics and how you simply have to accept things and just take the world as it is. "*Please* say something that shows we can do something about the world, that we can do something about our minds." And I thought, "It's come to that." The Buddha teaches a path that's all about what you can do—the potentials you have within you. And nowadays, saying that goes against a lot of what's supposed to be Dhamma.

So remember, we do have potentials. We're here to look for them and to develop them. It's in this sense that conviction in the Buddha's awakening is helpful. He shows the potential of what a human being can do. Of course, he was a very special human being, but the qualities he had developed are qualities that we all have in potential form. Resolution, ardency, heedfulness: These are things that we already have to some extent and that we can simply learn how to develop—to make them more consistent, more all-around.

At the same time, we have to watch out for other potentials, what the Buddha calls latent tendencies in the mind. He one time asked the monks what they knew about the five lower fetters. One monk listed the five lower fetters: uncertainty, grasping at habits and practices, identity view, sensual passion, and ill will. And the Buddha asked, "Can you say that babies have those?" They don't have the full-

blown fetters. After all, they don't even have the concept of identity, so how could they have an identity view? They don't have the concept of Dhamma, so how could they have uncertainty about the Dhamma? They don't even have a concept of habit, so how can they grasp at habits and practices? But, he said, they do have the potential; they have a latent tendency.

What that means is when the child gets old enough to have these concepts, the fetters will come. They'll show themselves, which means that when you cut the fetters, you can't just rest content with having them not appear. You have to dig down inside to see what they come from—where the potential comes from. You've got to cut that. That's the whole message of the four noble truths. If you're going to get rid of something unskillful, you've got to find the cause—the potential that gives rise to it. Only then can you be safe from it.

But there are also good potentials. We read about the Buddha seeing that certain people had developed their minds to the point where they were ready for just one Dhamma talk, and that's all they needed. The potential was there. The Buddha could see those potentials, too—as when he taught Rahula, and Rahula gained awakening. So the Buddha saw the world as potentials, which is why he was able to make something good out of the world. He established the religion, established the Dhamma and the Vinaya to make it available to people so that they, too, could put an end to suffering.

So as you sit here and meditate, ask yourself: What are the potentials here? There'll be some bad ones, but there will also be some good ones. Why stew around in the bad ones? Why encourage them? The word they use in Pali is “provoke.” Why provoke them? Provoke the good ones, starting with something as simple as the breath. The way you breathe can have a huge impact on how you experience the body.

Evaluate what you've got, but then also evaluate what you can do with it. Then go ahead and experiment and explore until you've found what those potentials are and what they can do. You will have developed a skill. And you take advantage of the potentials that you have all around you. As Ajaan Lee once said, “This is the shame with the human race. We have so many potentials in the body and the mind, yet we hardly scratch them at the surface.”

There is the potential for awakening. There's the potential for unbinding. That's to be found in here, too. So learn how to look at what you've got in such a way that you can take advantage of the potentials it has. Don't rest content with saying, “Well, that's just the way it was. Causes and conditions made it that way.” The fact that there are causes and conditions means they can be manipulated; they can be nurtured in a good direction.

That's why the Buddha taught about causes and conditions. He wasn't interested in just talking about the way the world is. He was more interested in showing: This is what can be done with the world so that you go beyond it.