

# *The Limits of Old Karma*

*January 29, 2009*

Focus your attention on the breath and see how it feels. Where do you notice it in the body first? Where does it seem most prominent? You might notice the passage of the air through the nostrils, the rise and fall of the chest, the expansion of the rib cage: There are lots of different places in the body where you can sense the movement of the breath. Whichever area seems most prominent, focus there.

And notice if the breath feels comfortable there. If it doesn't, you can let it change. Let it be longer or shorter, or think of it as becoming longer or shorter. You don't have to *make* it be that way or force it to be that way. Just pose that thought in mind: What would longer breathing be like? And you'll find the body will breathe longer. What would shorter breathing be like? Heavier, lighter, faster, slower? Explore the possibilities of the breath right now. Think of the breathing as a whole-body process and see what that does to your sense of what kind of breathing feels best or what the body needs in terms of the breath. Sometimes it needs to be energized, sometimes relaxed. Get a sense of the breath potentials right now.

We're sitting here with lots of different potentials—potentials in the body, potentials in the mind. As we meditate we explore to see which potentials lead to the greatest happiness, the greatest pleasure. Allow the breath to be pleasurable and also notice what your mind is doing, what potentials you have in your mind: What thoughts could you be thinking right now? What qualities could you develop? At the moment we're trying to emphasize the thoughts that focus you on the breath in the present moment; and we're trying to be inquisitive, trying to learn about the breath.

Those two factors—thinking of the breath or focusing on the breath, and being inquisitive—count as directed thought and evaluation, two of the factors of jhana. Use them to see how you can stay with the breath in a way that feels comfortable, giving rise to feelings of refreshment and pleasure. And as you probe and explore, you begin to realize that there is this potential right here for the body to feel comfortable from the inside, for the mind to be willing to settle down. There are lots of other potentials you could have focused on right now, but you don't have to. Make the most of your freedom to focus on your ability to expand skillful potentials.

Occasionally you'll find yourself running up against some blockages, or pains that, no matter how skillfully you breathe, are going to stay as pains. Or there may be some chatter away in the mind that won't go away. You don't have to focus on it; just let it be there in the background. But it does impinge a little bit on your awareness.

In other words, you find yourself running up against old karma obstructions. Fortunately, though, the present moment is not totally shaped by old karma. If it were there'd be no point in practicing. There'd be nothing you could do. Everything would be determined by something that went before, which of course would have been determined by something that went before that and on back in

an infinite regress. This is why the Buddha rejected the idea that everything was determined by a creator, or everything was determined by old karma. Otherwise the practice would be pointless.

But it's *not* pointless. We do have a measure of freedom here in the present moment. There may be some restrictions that come from past karma, but you can learn to work around them. This is a principle that applies across the board in the practice, not just while you're sitting here meditating, but in your activities throughout daily life. You find yourself running up against difficulties that, no matter how skillfully you try to respond to them, are still there. You have the choice of focusing on the difficulties to the point where you can't do anything about them, and get more and more entrapped and frustrated by them. Or if you try to ignore them and pretend they're not there, that doesn't work either. So you've got to find another approach. And fortunately, the best approach is always possible.

The present moment is a limited moment but it does have its openings. It does have its potentials. The wise approach is to admit the limitations but also to want to explore the potentials for what's skillful. If you have certain responsibilities, learn how to carry them out but at the same time, you're working on the qualities of the mind. That's what the Buddhist teachings about the *paramis* or the perfections are all about. Even as you go through your everyday responsibilities, you have the opportunity to develop good qualities of mind—patience, persistence, determination, truthfulness.

Some of us have a romantic notion about the ideal situation to meditate. You're off by yourself. No responsibilities at all. Totally free to meditate all day long. But even in places like that, you find there are limitations, difficulties. And if the meditation is not going well, what do you have to blame it on? Can't blame it on anybody else. It's just yourself. I know a lot of monks who've been out in the forest. They say sometimes they can go for months and months and months with no progress in the meditation. So it's not the case that going off alone and having no responsibilities is going to solve everything. If you do have responsibilities, remind yourself that you don't have to carry them around in the mind all the time. Your outside work is your outside work. Your inside work can always keep going on—learning patience, learning to have a good humor about the whole thing.

A couple years back, we had a problem in the electric room here. The county inspector came and said that it was totally unacceptable. Everything was going to have to be torn out and redone within just a few days. So a couple of the Americans came and worked on it and complained the entire time about how difficult it was, how much they were having to do without sleep, and just on and on and on. And it wasn't helping the job at all. I kept thinking about how things were over in Thailand when we'd have difficulties like that. People there seem to have a much better humor about things. They seem to have a better understanding of the perfections, that even when things are difficult outside or inside, you've got the opportunity to develop good qualities of mind. Whatever the situation, you want to figure out the skillful way to approach it so that you minimize the difficulties and maximize your potentials for freedom.

If you're dealing with more than just present responsibilities—say, with the results of past mistakes where you've harmed people—the same principle

applies. You admit the mistakes. You admit the limitations that they place on you now, but then you try to work around them. Don't let yourself be hemmed in by your past mistakes or be hemmed in by your past karma, because these things don't have to totally shape the present moment. We have some freedom right here, right now, and a lot of the practice is learning how to recognize that fact and maximize it to get the best use out of it.

Because all the aspects of the path are possible, whatever the limitations from your past karma are. You can learn how to be generous. You can learn how to be virtuous. You can learn how to develop good qualities of mind. When you've made a mistake, you admit the fact. And you say, "I'm going to learn from that. I'm not going to repeat that mistake." And that's as far as you have to go. You don't have to punish yourself, that somehow by feeling really, really sorry the punishment will go away. That's a dog's way of thinking. It knows it's done something bad. It gets on its back and wags its tail and looks really sorry, and hopes that by doing that it's going to appease you. But you're not a dog. You're a human being. As a human being, all you're asked is to recognize the mistake, resolve not repeat it, and then try to develop goodwill for yourself and for everybody else—for the people you've already wronged, for the people you might potentially wrong in the future. Spread goodwill to them, maintain that attitude of goodwill, and you'll be less likely to wrong them.

Or even just the fact that you're sitting here in a human body: That has its limitations but it has its potentials as well. If you're feeling trapped in the body, ask yourself, "Why are you trapped?" Well, you have this perception that it's you or it's yours. You picked up the perception because there were times when it felt useful to identify with the body. It was a means for gaining pleasure. But now you're beginning to realize that identifying with the body has its drawbacks as well. As you get older, illness comes. Pains come. Even just the illness of hunger, the Buddha said, is the foremost illness. That's something we all suffer from every day, every day. This is why we have the reflection on the four requisites. If we didn't have food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, the body would die. We're born with these gaping needs.

But at the same time, you can learn how to use the body as a basis for the practice. You can focus on the breath. As you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you can use the breath as a mirror for the mind. If you get into difficult situations with other people, you'll notice that there will be a change in your breath. What can you do to work with the breath in a way that you're focused not on the difficulties posed by that other person, but on the fact that you can still maintain your evenness of mind regardless of the situation outside? You can use the breath to help you with that.

As you work with the breath, you begin to see the power of your perceptions in that the way you conceive of the breath is going to have an influence on how you actually breathe. If you think of the body as a big solid that you've got to push the breath through—it feels like this big lump of fat sitting here and you're trying to force air through the fat—it just doesn't work. It's laborious. It's tiring. But if you perceive the body as an energy field—when you breathe in, it's just more energy joining with the energy already there—it all flows in smoothly, and you don't have to push anything through anything else. It changes the way you breathe, changes the sensation of the breath.

As you think of all the different energy channels in the body connecting together, it gets easier and easier for you not to have to breathe at all. The different parts of the body aren't fighting with one another. Your pores feel open. The breath comes in, goes out. Everything feels connected. Everything is charged with breath energy to the point where the breath gets more and more gentle, more and more gentle, and finally grows still. A lot of this has to do with the perception you hold in mind.

You begin to realize, as the sense of boundary around the body begins to dissolve, that your perception of being in the body was something you've chosen to do. You're not really trapped in the body. You've trapped yourself, but you can free yourself. You can focus on space: around the body, permeating throughout the body, between all the atoms. You can focus on the awareness that encompasses everything. Your sense of what's happening in the body is going to change. And that's just a concentration practice. But the potential for experiencing infinite space or the potential for experiencing infinite consciousness is all right here. You learn how to ferret it out and make the most of it.

So this is how we live with our past karma: Accept whatever limitations there are, but also look for the areas that are not limited, to see in which direction freedom lies. This means that when you're accepting the situation in the present, it's partly accepting the limitations and learning how to be equanimous about them, but also accepting that there are lots of potentials for freedom here. If you really want true happiness, you try to make the most of those. The Dhamma is not for people who want to be told they just have to accept the way things are, and that'll be totally fine. The Dhamma doesn't stop right there, because the present moment is not always a wonderful moment. It can be pretty miserable. Ask the victims of torture, of natural disasters. But even in extremely miserable situations, the same principle holds: You accept your limitations but you also accept that there are potentials for freedom, potentials for true happiness that can be developed. There's work to be done but it's good work, regardless of the situation. If you keep that attitude in mind you can practice the Dhamma and benefit from the Dhamma wherever you are.