

A Range of Potentials

July 16, 2005

As you sit here, you're surrounded by all kinds of potentials. You've got the breath, which has the potential for pleasure or pain. There are all kinds of potential thoughts, or sounds you could focus on, things that you can engage, both in body and mind. In the body, you've got the elements. The body has potentials for feelings of solidity, feelings of coolness, warmth, motion, stillness, heaviness, lightness: all kinds of potentials. The question is: What are you going to make of them? Which ones you are going to choose to focus on, and why? These are choices that the mind is making all the time. The lesson that Buddha's teaching is that you can learn how to be skillful in your choices.

For instance here with the breath, you can really make something out of the breath: strong states of concentration, a sense of bliss, ease, equanimity, stillness. There's that potential. Why are you sitting here trying to make the most of it? Because you find that the mind has a tendency to jump after other things, things that it's used to getting engaged in. All too often, people come up here, close their eyes, and as things get still, all sorts of work and thoughts of families, thoughts of politics, all kinds of things can come up in the mind. Part of the mind says, "Here is a whole hour. You're free to think of these things." You may get some good out of getting engaged with them, but not nearly as much good as learning how to focus on the breath, for the time being at least, because the mind needs a center, needs a place to put itself in a position from which it can see that these things really are potentials. So many times a particular thought consumes the mind, and you don't see any way out of it, or a particular sensation consumes the body and you don't see any way out of it, because the mind hasn't developed the potential of good solid foundation from which it can look at things clearly.

So develop that potential first, and as for other things that you usually like to get engaged with, just let them be for the time being. Learn how not to get engaged with them. This is a very important skill: how to pull yourself out. I think I've told you the story before of when I was teaching in Chiang Mai when I was a lay person. I learned Thai boxing, mainly as a form of exercise, and the first lesson they teach you in Thai boxing is not how to hit your opponent with your elbow or your knee or make those great roundhouse kicks. It's how to back off, how to extricate yourself. Once you know how to pull out, then you can choose when to go in. If you see things are getting bad, you can pull out again.

It's the same with all the physical and mental potentials that surround you. You want to learn how to pull out no matter how entangling a particular potential is that you've gotten into. You can learn how to disentangle yourself. So whatever comes up in the course of the meditation, if it's not dealing with the breath, if it's not dealing with feelings of ease and pleasure in the body, just let it go. Sometimes it will hang around for a while, as if it's looking for an opening to slip back in. But that's simply the after-effect of having been entangled for so long. Just because it's hanging around, doesn't mean you have to get back entangled with it. Just let it go for the time being, and eventually it'll wear out on its own—as long as you're not feeding it, as long as you're not knitting something new out of it. Eventually it'll go away. It may take a long time, it may take a short time, but you just don't have to get involved.

The whole purpose of this is so that you start seeing how much you really do knit together your experience of the present moment, or of the past, or of the future. It's your knitting. We tend to think of the present moment—the things we see, experience, both outside and inside the body—simply as a given that we have to react to. But as the mind gets more and more still, you begin to realize that what's given is a potential. There's a potential for sensation or form; there's a potential for feeling pleasure or pain; and for perception, and for thought constructs, and even for consciousness. Those potentials just sit there, kind of buzzing, but not really doing anything until you get involved. We're so used to getting involved that we tend to forget that we have these choices. We don't notice how much we create what we think is given. To see that, you have to get the mind really still, and yet stay very alert—alert to what you're doing, alert to the consequences of what you're doing—and to see this, you have to let go in stages.

First, you let go of getting involved in really blatant and coarse things. Then you begin to sense more subtle levels of action and intention and choice that you're engaged in, and the type of reality that engagement creates. When you see the intentions in action, and you see the stress they're causing, then you can drop them. You settle down to a new level, and then you watch there for a while until you begin to detect the motions of the mind getting engaged in more subtle potentials. You keep this up, peeling things away like this. This is how you let go. When we use the phrase *let go*, it often sounds like there are these things that we hold onto the way you hold onto something solid in your hand, but as you get more and more sensitive to your own actions, your intentions and choices, you begin to realize that even solidity is something you've created—out of a potential, you haven't created it out of whole cloth, but you create your experience of it. It's a fabrication. And the question is, is it worth it? Why would you fabricate it unless you expect it to give you some pleasure, some sense of satisfaction?

So you want to look at your experiences and see where you're making your choices and how much effort you're putting into them. And what you are getting as a result? Letting go here means that you just disengage, when you see that the results aren't worth the effort. As for the things that are worth the effort, you keep them up, keep doing them, until they're done for you what they can. This is the path. You maximize the potentials for ease, mindfulness, bliss, alertness, discernment. You keep at them as long as they have something to offer, and when they don't, then you can totally let everything go. The letting go here means basically you've seen that they've done what they can, there's nothing more they can do for you, and you just stop doing them.

This is why letting go and cessation happen together. If fabrications were things that you're holding onto and you put them down, they wouldn't cease. They would still be there. But because they're something you do—and as the Buddha said, all the aggregates are things you do, you fabricate them—when you stop fabricating, that's cessation.

So this is an important issue in your meditation, seeing the potentials *as* potentials. Sometimes you have a little thought quivering the edges of your awareness, and part of you already knows what the thought is about, and the other part says, "Well, let's look into it." That's what the Buddha means when he talks about things being enticing. The potential is there, and you've explored it before, and you think, well, this must be something worth going into, either because it looks appealing, or looks important. Maybe you could fabricate it into something slightly different. You may go because it looks entertaining, or you may feel obligated to go there—if the potential looks really painful and you've got to look into it to see if there's some danger.

But as you meditate, you learn to question those imperatives that you've got to look into this, you've got to look into that, or you feel attracted this, or attracted to that. Learn how to stop yourself before you really get involved in the potential. Learn to recognize which potentials really are worth developing, and which ones you just don't touch. When you look at your experience in the body and mind in this way, many more potentials start showing up. You realize you have a wide range for engaging in the things that are skillful.

So try to engage with the path. Make that your default mode. When there are unpleasant feelings in the body, just let them be for the time being. You don't have to get engaged with them. Notice that there are other levels of sensation in the body, more subtle levels of breath, say, that are right there in the same spot as the grosser sensations that are weighing on you. Learn how to tune in to those potentials.

In the area of the mind, it's the same sort of thing: There are potentials for all kinds of thoughts that could drive you to distraction, but mixed in there, there are other potentials for thought, potentials for other mind states that are more skillful. Learn how to be precise in how you focus in, how you get engaged. You see that you can take these aggregates that you've been carrying around and you can turn them into a path. Or to put it in other way, you can take the potential for aggregates to become burdensome and just don't go there. You focus on the potential for them to become a way to awakening. It's all about how you choose to focus on things, how you choose to get engaged, and how you choose not to get engaged.

So try to see your present experience less as a given, and more as a wide range of potentials. And then make the most of your freedom of choice.