

Potentials

August 7, 2021

As you survey the body sitting here right now, the mind right now, you'll notice that there are lots of potentials: There's a breath potential—the energy that can flow in different places. There's a fire potential—the warmth. There's a potential for coolness—which is water. A potential for solidity—earth. A potential for space.

The mind has potentials, too. There's a potential for sensuality; there's a potential for ill-will; there's a potential for renunciation; and a potential for goodwill.

So try to choose your potentials well and learn how to cultivate the good ones. Think of the mind and body as being like a field: We've got lots of seeds here. Some seeds have already sprouted into little plants. Others are not sprouting, but they could sprout if you watered them. So which ones do you want?

The Buddha recommends that we focus on the potentials for pleasure in the body. How can you make the breath pleasant? Start out with that. Take a couple of good, long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you *feel* the breathing in the body, and ask yourself if that rhythm feels good. If it doesn't, you can change. Does deep breathing feel good, or shallow breathing? Heavy, light? Fast, slow? There are lots of ways you can breathe right now. As you get sensitive to the breath in the body, you begin to notice that it's not just the breath coming in and out of the lungs. There are feelings of energy flowing here, flowing there in different parts of the body. How can you take advantage of that? How can you develop that potential?

When the breath starts feeling good, one of the things you can do is to make a survey of the body: Go through the body section by section.

- Start down around the navel, watch it for a while as you breathe in, breathe out, and then ask yourself, "Could it be more comfortable? Is there any tension or tightness there?" Think of it relaxing.
- Then move on up: the solar plexus, the middle of the chest, base of the throat, middle of the head.
- Then start at the base of the skull at the back of the neck. Think of the breath energy entering there, from behind, and then going down through the shoulders, the arms, to the tips of the fingers.
- And then going from the back of the neck down the spine, out the legs.

Try to develop these good potentials here. As you do this, you're developing good potentials not only in the body, but also in the mind. The fact that you're not getting involved in sensual thinking means you're developing the potential for renunciation, finding a pleasure that doesn't have to depend on sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. It depends on getting the mind settled and still.

You're also developing the potential for goodwill. You're showing goodwill for yourself as you develop the good potentials in the body and the mind. Once they're developed, you try to maintain them. You don't just leave them.

This means not only through the session, but also as you get up and go through the rest of the evening. It's good to learn to look at your mind in other situations in the same way: that there are lots of potentials there.

As Ajaan Lee once said, "We human beings have lots of good potentials, but we don't take advantage of them." He compares it to someone who has a piece of land but doesn't cultivate that piece of land, and goes cultivating other people's land instead. Of course, you're going to get into trouble. You want this person to be that way, that person to be this way, and you're upset when they're not.

But you've neglected your own potentials when you make your happiness dependent on things outside. You're moving into other people's property, and you're neglecting the much better potentials you have here in your own. These are things you can learn how to master, so that no matter where you are, at the very least you can breathe in a way that gives you a sense of well-being. Then you can use that sense of well-being to fight off unskillful potentials in the mind.

Sometimes you'll latch onto a potential for anger and run with it. Or a potential for fear. When you do that, you start developing the unpleasant potentials in the body as well. The breath starts getting strange, constricted, unpleasant, and that aggravates the anger, aggravates the fear—and then the whole thing snowballs. You go looking outside for some sort of help, and you find that outside is a mess, too.

So learn to recognize the good potentials you've got here. They may not be obvious at first. Some of them are like seeds for redwood trees: They're the tiniest seeds. They don't look like they would have a potential for a large tree at all. But once you learn how to recognize them, then you can water them and get a good big tree on its way—the difference being the trees take a lot of time, but some of these potentials inside, if you learn how to cultivate them properly, can give you results immediately.

So expand your notion of what the breath can do, what its potentials are. And keep an eye out for the mind when it starts focusing on unskillful intentions. The Buddha calls these *areas of exploration*.

If we think in terms of karma, your past karma is serving up a buffet of potential dishes that you could choose from. And you can explore, “What does this dish taste like? What does that dish taste like?” You begin to get a sense of which dishes have no good potentials at all. You leave those alone, and you pay attention to the ones that are going to be really useful.

So, we all have good and bad potentials coming from our karma. That’s why we’re human beings: This is a mixed realm, and we’ve got a mixed batch. But the teaching on karma also means that simply because you’ve got some bad things coming in from the past doesn’t mean you have to suffer from them right now. This is where the skills you develop in the present moment make a huge difference.

One of the potentials we can develop in the mind is not being easily swayed by pleasure or pain. This is an important skill to develop as you meditate. If you get easily swayed by pleasure, then when the sensations of comfortable breathing get really, really nice, you just start wallowing in them. You lose your focus, and eventually everything falls apart.

You’ve got to realize that you have to stick with the breath to maintain your focus. It’s the act of being attentive to the breath that gives rise to those pleasant feelings to begin with. So make sure that you keep producing them by being attentive, and the feelings will take care of themselves. That’s how you learn to be with pleasure but not be overwhelmed by it.

Some people feel that to avoid being overwhelmed by pleasure you have to run away from it. But the Buddha saw that that was not the case. He tried running away for six years; he found that he was going to die. But if you create this skillful pleasure inside, that can give you the nourishment you need on the path.

As for pains: Again, you learn how not to be overcome by them. The first line of business is to find which areas of the body have pleasant potentials, focus on those, and then using them as your grounding. From there you can look at the pains and ask yourself, “What is it about physical pain that as soon as the mind focuses in on it, aggravates it? What are the perceptions? What are the conversations it’s having with itself about the pain? Can you learn to be with the pain and not get involved in those unskillful potentials?”

So as you’re sitting here, the potential to have a very pleasant hour is there. The potential for making yourself miserable for the hour is also there—you have the choice. So look for the good potentials if you want to get the most out of this hour, and let the other potentials go by the wayside.

The more you develop the good potentials, the more you create better potentials for the future. It’s like getting more and more people on your side inside.