

Potentials Past & Present

February 1, 2022

Focus on your breath. Notice that you can breathe in lots of different ways. The breath in the body has lots of potentials, so see what potential is good right now. It's good to start with something energizing. So start with long breathing, deep breathing, and if that feels good, keep it up until it doesn't feel good anymore. Then you can try other ways of breathing: shorter, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. See what feels good for the body right now and what kind of breathing you can follow. Sometimes what feels good for the body is a little bit too subtle and you begin to lose your focus. So breathe in a way that's good both for the body and for the mind.

This is a potential that we very rarely make full use of. The breath comes in, goes out, keeps us alive, and for most people that's it. But the Buddha found that by focusing attention on his breath, breathing in different ways to help the mind to settle down—energizing it when it needs energizing, calming it when it needs calming—that was his path to awakening. So there's a lot of potential right here. Take some time to explore it.

This is in line with the principle that he discovered as part of his awakening, that we experience happiness and sorrow in this life based on our actions. In some cases, happiness or sorrow comes from past actions, but past actions are not the total story. Sometimes you hear it said that you have to learn how to simply accept things as they are because that's the way they've got to be, based on causes and conditions from the past, which is defeatist. If we had no choices in the present moment, if we had no power to shape the present moment, we would have learned that point a long time ago.

The fact is that we see there're some things that we can change and other things we can't. A lot of life lies in figuring out which is which. We have potentials coming in from the past and sometimes they place limitations on us. Certain things just had to happen because of events in the past—they couldn't be changed. But how we respond to that and how we shape that into our experience in the present moment is up to us. We don't have total leeway. It's like a cylinder that's oriented north to south, one end to the north, one end to the south. If you try to get it to roll, it'll roll either east or west, but with that orientation, you can't make it roll north or south. Our life is like this. There are some things we can make go left or right, east or west. If we try to make them go north or south, they won't go.

Another thing we've learned is that some things become true because we imagined them first.

William James, an American philosopher, noted that there're two kinds of truth. There are the truths that simply are the way they are regardless of whether you want them to be that way or not, like the motions of the planets and the stars. But there are others things that will become true only if you want them. In other words, you have to bring them into being. That kind of truth starts with your imagination. So you have to learn how to get some control over the imagination to use it well. Sometimes it tries to push things in areas where it can't make a difference. You go back and think about the past: "If only this, if only that. If only I had said this or hadn't done that." You think somehow that if you can imagine it, you can go back and change things. Part of the mind, of course, knows that you can't. But there's another part that just keeps wanting. This is where you have to focus your attention on making changes in areas where you really *can* make a difference.

Think of the Buddha's teachings on suffering. Some of the things we've done in the past will lead to suffering—now or into the future. But the question of whether we have to suffer from the pain that's going to be caused by those actions, that's something that we can change here in the present moment.

You notice when the Buddha taught people the path to the end of suffering, he didn't say, "Well, you deserve to suffer, so I'm not going to teach you," or "it's not worth my time to teach you." He never said that. No matter what people have done in the past, what karma comes in from the past, there is a skill that enables you not to have to suffer from it. The pain may be there, but you train the mind so it doesn't have to be pained by the pain. can

That's what's so special about the Buddha's skill. So we try to focus our energies on what can be changed, where we can make a difference. As for the things that can't be changed, that's where you have to develop equanimity.

The Buddha taught four attitudes called *brahmaviharas*—the sublime attitudes. There's goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Goodwill is a wish for happiness. Compassion is connected to goodwill, in the sense that if you see somebody suffering or creating the causes for suffering, your attitude is, "How can we help them relieve their suffering? How can we put an end to that suffering? If they're doing something that's going to be unskillful, how can we stop them or get them to be willing to stop?" Empathetic joy is what your goodwill feels when you see somebody who's already happy or doing something that's going to be leading to happiness in the future. You're happy for them. You're not jealous. You're not resentful.

Equanimity, though, is something apart. You may have noticed in the chants just now from the brahmaviharas: Goodwill is a chant that may all beings be happy. Compassion: “May those who are suffering put an end to their suffering.” Empathetic joy is, “May those who are happy not be deprived of the good fortune they have attained.” It’s all “may, may, may.” But when you get to equanimity, it’s a statement of fact: “All beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions.” In other words, you realize that because of people’s actions, there are some things that just cannot be changed—at least for the time being. You know that if you spend your energy trying to change those things, it’s a waste. We have only so much energy in life and there are so many other areas where we could exercise our goodwill and our compassion and our empathetic joy. So we have to focus there.

But again, seeing where the line is drawn between what we can change and what we can’t change requires a lot of experience and strong powers of observation. Fortunately, we don’t have to reinvent the issue every time. We could start with some good advice from the past. Start with the way you breathe. That’s something you can see very clearly that you have some control over. Then look at how you’re talking to yourself. For the time being, talk to yourself about the breath. What kind of breathing would feel good now and would give rise to a sense of well-being? How can you let that well-being spread through the body?

Ajaan Lee, my teacher’s teacher, would say to think of the breath flowing through the nerves. The comfort that goes with the breath flows along with it. Wherever you find a pattern of tension or a blockage in the body, think of the breath going right through, dissolving it away. Then try to maintain that sense of full-body awareness, full-body breathing, fully here in the present moment. At the very least, you give the mind a chance to rest and you’re developing strengths in the mind as well.

There’s the strength of conviction that your actions can really make a difference—again, within limits, but the important opening is that you can learn how not to suffer even in the face of bad events. After all, we live in this world of birth, aging, illness, and death. Wherever there’s birth, there’s going to be aging, there’s going to be illness, there’s going to be death. When we signed on to this birth, we didn’t look at the fine print. The only way there’s going to be any solid happiness is if we find that something inside that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die. So we don’t have to place our happiness on things that will change.

There’s a poem in the Pali Canon: A woman who was beautiful when she was young goes through a catalog of her body, what it used to be like: what the hair used to be like, what her eyes used to be like, what her ears, all the way down

through the body to the feet. But now she's eighty years old, what's her hair like now? There's a twinge of regret, but each time she makes a comparison between the way her body used to be and what it is now, she says, "But the truth of the truth-speaker's words doesn't change."

You can interpret that in two ways: One is that the Buddha spoke of how the body is inconstant. That's a truth that's always true. That's a constant truth. But the other way you can interpret her refrain is that the Buddha speaks of a true reality that *doesn't* change. There's a dimension that the mind can touch if you develop all the right qualities in mind—in particular, mindfulness, concentration, discernment: what we're trying to develop right now. You get very clear about what's going on in the mind, how the mind takes raw material from the past and can fashion it either in a skillful way or in an unskillful way. You try to do it as skillfully as you can, noticing when the mind begins to run off in directions that are not all that helpful. Remind yourself: Okay, you have the choice. You can follow that direction or you can go in another direction. The cylinder can go right or it can go left.

Of course, remember that you have that choice. There may be part of the mind that's really stubborn and insistent, wanting to go left when you see that right is more skillful, but you can be stubborn, too. You find that as you make this more and more consistently a habit in the mind, you can draw on it when you really need it. It takes you to more and more refined states inside to the point where you find something that's not shaped by karma—either past or present. That's when you find the truth that doesn't change.

So when you find the mind thinking back into the past with regret, remind yourself: If things in the past were really good, they wouldn't have changed on you. There's something really good in life that doesn't change and it's best if we can set our sights there, because that's where true happiness can be found—a happiness that's never going to disappoint.

And it's a place of total freedom. In fact, it's so free that it's not even a place. As the Buddha said, it's outside of space, outside of time. Totally free—so free that it's hard to imagine. We can use our imagination to shape things within the realm of causality. And again, it's important that we train our imagination so that it doesn't just run riot and beat us up about things that cannot be changed. Focus it instead on the things that *can* be changed, and it'll change in a good direction.

Don't keep trying to roll the cylinder north and south. Find which direction, left or right, east or west, is the best direction, and then just keep rolling it in that direction—until it takes you someplace that doesn't have any directions anymore. That's when you're really free.