A Lotus from the Mud

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The lotus is often invoked as a symbol of the practice because the lotus grows in the mud, it grows in murky water, and yet it rises up above the water and blossoms. It’s white, pure, with a clean scent. And if you’re drop any water on the lotus blossom, it just rolls right off. This is a symbol of the human mind, of the potential in the human mind. We all have our defilements. We all have our murky past. But it’s still possible, from the murk, from the defilements, to grow something pure, something that defilements would just roll right off. It’s always good to keep that in mind. Sometimes we sit here and meditate, and we start thinking about things that have happened to us in the past, things we’ve done in the past. We get overcome with feelings of regret and unworthiness. The regret is good, the unworthiness is not helpful. This is why the Buddha teaches us ways to think about our past actions, our past mistakes, so that we don’t get overwhelmed by them. There was a teaching in his time, the teaching of the Jains, which said that if anybody steals, has illicit sex, anybody who lies is going to go to hell. Well, that consigns you to hell right there. If you have any of these things in your past—and we all have some of them, to one extent or another—that automatically, as the Buddha said, places us in hell right now. There’s no hope for us. Unfortunately, that’s not how the principle of karma works. What we experience is a combination of past influences and our own present actions. It turns out the present actions are the ones that make all the difference. This is why there’s no talk in the Buddha’s teachings about people deserving to suffer or not deserving awakening. The potential is there. The opportunity for choice is there in each and every present moment. What we’re learning to do as we meditate is to learn how to make skillful choices right here and now. But it’s also important to bring the right attitudes. The first of the Buddha’s teachings is that when you recognize that you have made a mistake in the past, you realize that by allowing yourself to indulge in remorse, it’s not going to make the past mistake go away. So instead, you recognize it as a mistake. You resolve not to repeat it and realize that’s all that’s really asked of you. Then you develop thoughts of goodwill, unlimited goodwill. This is what turns ordinary human goodwill into a Brahma-vihara, Brahma-goodwill. In other words, we all feel goodwill for some people. That’s a common human characteristic, but it’s not necessarily universal. But you work on making it universal, realizing that you’re not going to benefit from anybody suffering, so why would you want them to suffer? And if you can’t feel goodwill for everybody, there are bound to be circumstances where you would be tempted to be harmful, which is not going to be good for you in the long term. So that’s one reason you want to develop unlimited goodwill, so you can have a guarantee that you’re not going to act on unskillful intentions, unskillful impulses. If you meet up with someone you don’t like, you remember, “Oh, this is a person who lies within the range of my goodwill.” Goodwill doesn’t have to depend on liking the person. There are people who do very disagreeable things, and you’re not supposed to like them. But you don’t have to wish them to suffer. And when dealing with them, if you’re coming from a position of goodwill, many times they will respond in kind. So that’s one reason you want to develop thoughts of infinite goodwill, to guarantee or to help guarantee that you’re not going to act in unskillful ways. You’re not going to harm anybody. Secondly, as the Buddha says, if you can make your mind wide open and infinite, unlimited like this, then when the results of past bad actions do come, you’re hardly going to feel them. He gives several images to illustrate this. There’s the lump of salt in a glass of water. If it’s in a glass of water, you can’t drink it, because the lump of salt is so large that there’s so little water in the glass. But if you take that same lump of salt and throw it into a clean river, you can still drink the water in the river, because it’s hardly salty at all. The water is so much greater. In the same way, the results of past bad actions, when your mind is unlimited like this, are not going to have an effect on you. The Buddha says there’s a difference between a poor person stealing a goat and a rich person stealing a goat. A poor person steals a goat and they throw him in jail. A rich person steals a goat and he has to pay just a little fine. It’s an image we don’t like, but it’s the way things are. The important thing is that the water image is a much nicer image. So try to make your mind as open and expansive in that way. As you’re developing thoughts of goodwill, if you run across anyone that you have trouble feeling goodwill for, ask yourself point blank, “Why would you want this person to suffer?” And the mind will have its reasons, but if you keep at it, you begin to realize that those reasons are pretty paltry. And you do better. You do better to abandon them. Another way to deal skillfully in the present moment with the results of past bad actions is to train the mind not to be overwhelmed by pain and not to be overwhelmed by pleasure. This is one of the main skills we develop as we meditate. For instance, there’s a feeling of pain in the body while you sit here and meditate. The way you relate to that pain is an important part of training the mind. In other words, you learn, on the one hand, that you do have skills to use in the face of the pain. There are different ways of breathing, different ways of focusing your attention, that can help minimize the pain. So the pain becomes much less of an issue. And then you can start analyzing it. Once you’re confident enough that you can analyze the pain, you realize that it’s pain, and you don’t have to get totally surrounded by it when it comes. But you can step back a little bit and watch it, see how it comes, see how it goes. The fact that you’ve posed those questions in the mind has totally changed your relationship to pain. Instead of identifying yourself as the victim, you are now the scientist, you’re now the researcher, trying to understand this pain. You’re trying to understand how it comes, how it goes, and why the mind creates the bridge to it that makes the mind suffer as well. Because that perception of pain, when we tell ourselves, “There’s a pain right here,” you’ll often find there’s even a mental image, a picture that arises in the mind about what the pain is like. It seems to have a shape and a color. Sometimes we even feel it has a will of its own. It seems to have a will of its own because we’re helping in the fashioning of the pain. Scientific researchers have discovered that our experience of the world has something to do with the actual nervous impulses we gain, but there’s a lot that the brain supplies as well. That pain is partly the creature of your own mind. You’re trying to understand where is the craving, where is the perception that makes it worse? What are the mental states that inflame the pain? When you gain enough calm and confidence in the face of the pain like this, you can analyze it, and that changes your whole relationship to it. When your relationship is changed, then you begin to notice that the impact of the pain is much, much less on the mind. This is another way that we can protect ourselves from the impact of past bad actions, through changing our relationship to pain. The other way is changing our relationship to pleasure. The two go together. If you’re hungering after pleasure, that puts you in the same position where your mouth is wide open to gobble up whatever comes, and suddenly you find that instead of pleasure coming along, the menu has changed to pain. So you’ve got to learn how not to gobble up the pleasure. You’ve got to learn the meditation not to get overwhelmed by the pleasure. We sit here, and on days when things seem to go right, there’s no pain in the body, everything is nice, you focus on the breath, and then you discover that you don’t really know where you are. You’ve got swallowed up by the pleasure. The breath feels good, and your focus gets smaller and smaller and smaller. You find yourself in this hazy state. It’s a pleasant but very unfocused state, what they call delusion concentration. So it’s not that the pleasure is bad. It’s simply that you’re not relating to it in the proper way. You just kind of jump right in. What you’ve got to do as soon as there’s pleasure, you’ve got to realize that you’ve got to work with the pleasure. Again, you’re a researcher of pleasure. What can you do with that pleasure? One, you learn how to spread it around the body. This is one of the basic skills of good, strong concentration. Once there’s a feeling of ease in the breath, you allow the breath to work through the body, the pleasure to work through the body. The image they have in the Canon is of a bathman kneading water into dough. So you knead the pleasure through the body. You find there are areas of the body that won’t respond. Watch them for a while to see how they will respond. Sometimes there’s an emotional issue with the different parts of the body you hold onto, for emotional reasons. How can you sit with them very calmly and quietly, to the point where they have enough trust in you to open up? Other times, the causes are more strictly physical. Posture, the way you tend to hold the body. As you sit here, which muscles are you tightening up that don’t need to be tightened? Try to keep a straight posture, but you find that when you really test the different muscles in the body, that there are a lot of areas where there’s a lot of tension that you hold onto. And it’s not really necessary. You don’t need to hold onto that tension in order to keep the body straight. This may be related to an old injury, but you learn that you don’t need to hold onto that, you don’t need to keep on doing that. This way, again, you become a researcher of the pleasure, and that changes your relationship to the pleasure. The pleasure is there, it feels good, but you’re not cobbling it down, you’re not indulging it out of fear that it’s going to go away. As you get more and more confident that you know how to breathe in a way that keeps the pleasure coming, you’ll be more confident in experimenting with the pleasure, seeing what works and what doesn’t work, and spreading it through the body. Then when you’ve got that state of pleasure, you learn how to watch it again. Sometimes it comes with a rapture that begins to get a little bit overwhelming. See if you can change your focus a little bit, get in under the radar of the rapture, and just be with a sense of ease, a subtle sense of ease in the body. In other words, you’re letting go. You learn to keep your mind in a state where it’s not overwhelmed by the pleasure. It’s learning about pleasure. And it’s in developing that posture of the researcher that’s going to help you develop the insight that ultimately will free you from being a slave to pleasure and pain when you fully master the concentration. You’ve fully understood how the mind tends to push away the pain and go running for the pleasure, totally through a lack of understanding. So as we sit here and meditate, we’re working precisely on the skills that are needed to grow that lotus out of the mud. So even though we may have past bad actions and we may have to experience them to some extent, the mind doesn’t need to suffer from those past bad actions. It can learn to develop the skills, developing an attitude of limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, learning to develop the skills for how to deal with pain, how to deal with pleasure, so they don’t overcome the mind. When you have those skills, then there’s no fear of what happened in the past. Even though there’s mud, the lotus can still bloom. And it doesn’t have to be touched by muddy water. Even clean water rolls right off, to say nothing of muddy water. The mind can then be that pure. So it is possible, given the mud of our background, that the lotus can still grow. And when things get discouraging, always keep that thought in mind. The potential for the lotus is always there.

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