NR The Mind’s Many Potentials

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King Vissanity Goswami once came to see the Buddha and asked him, “What is the one thing that makes us skillful, that underlies skillful behavior?” And the Buddha’s answer was interesting. He didn’t say that it’s the basic goodness. He said, “Heedfulness.” Heedfulness is basically a sense that there’s danger, and you have to be very watchful and very careful. And where is the danger? The danger is in the mind. Because the mind is capable of all kinds of things. The Buddha once said that if you think of how variegated the animal world is, it’s all kinds of different animals, from insects and worms and things all the way up to huge whales, dinosaurs, whatever. He said the mind is more variegated than that. It’s capable of all kinds of things. Great good, great bad. And none of those is more natural to the mind than anything else. The mind has lots of potentials. That’s where the danger lies. It has so many potentials. And it’s heedfulness that inclines us to do good, because we see that our actions have results and certain actions make us suffer. So we have to be very careful to watch exactly what are you doing that’s causing suffering. And we have to watch again and again and again, because the mind does have this tendency to forget. That’s why an essential part of training the mind is mindfulness. Or to go even deeper, it’s why we have to train the mind to begin with. You have to keep working against whatever unskillful habits it has. And the mind can be trained. This is based on another part of the mind, which is that it has two sides. There’s the doing side and the knowing side. As a scientist once said, it’s because we both know and do that we know about the world. We know cause and effect. If the mind were totally passive, all it did is just know, know, know. It really wouldn’t know that much. It would see things coming and going and rising and passing away. But it wouldn’t know what caused something else, or what was caused by something else. It wouldn’t see those connections. It wouldn’t be able to test them. It’s because we can make choices and test our assumptions to see what holds true again and again and again, that over time we begin to develop knowledge. And we can begin to see that our actions really do influence the pleasure or pain that we experience in life. We have to be very careful because sometimes there are impulses that say, “You want to do this, you want to do that.” You can’t always trust them. That’s where the heedfulness comes in. Even if there’s something you want to do very much, just because it seems such a strong desire, you can’t trust that it’s going to be true, that you can depend on it, you rely on it, that it’s going to make you happy. This is where that principle of strong respect for the training that we just chanted about comes in, realizing that we don’t have to keep reinventing the Dharma wheel all the time, that there have been people who’ve gone before us and they’ve laid out a path, how we can train the mind. So we can take its potential for anything and turn it to the potential for awakening. And it’s done through our actions. We can purify ourselves through actions or we can defile ourselves through actions. The mind is not innately pure or defiled. Buddha once said, “It’s luminous,” which simply means that it knows, it’s aware of things. No matter how defiled it is in terms of greed, anger, and delusion, it does have the potential to overcome that delusion at any time. And whether we take advantage of that potential or not, it depends on the training, it depends on our heedfulness. Acting on greed, no matter how much we like the greed, is going to lead to suffering. Acting on aversion, acting on delusion, it’s going to lead to suffering. We have to watch out, we have to be careful. So we need to keep these things in mind, that keeping in mind, that’s the function of mindfulness. This is why it’s so important, as we meditate, to work on this continuity of being able to remind ourselves. Stay with the breath, stay with the breath, again and again. I once read where a teacher said, “Mindfulness isn’t hard, it’s remembering to be mindful that’s hard.” It’s an idea that’s based on a misunderstanding. Mindfulness isn’t just awareness, it’s keeping something in mind, reminding yourself that there are these dangers, but there are these potentials. Some of the potentials are good, some of them you have to be very wary of. The mind didn’t have to be very wary. If the mind didn’t have all these different potentials, the Buddha wouldn’t have taught heedfulness. So you do have to be careful and you have to be mindful and keep remembering that you’ve got to be very careful. So on the one hand, you keep the training in mind and you apply it to your mind. When an idea comes up, you want to measure it against the training. If you don’t find specific detailed instructions or detailed evaluations of that particular mind state, then you say, “Well, now I’ve got to think back on when I’ve given in to this mind state before. Has it led in a good direction or a bad?” Keep focusing on your actions. That’s how you learn. Remember your actions, remember what you’ve done and the results you’ve gotten. This is why so much of the teaching focuses on the doing and less on the being of what you are. Because you can’t depend that when the mind settles down and is still and seems very clear, that it really is clear and that you can depend on whatever thoughts come up. You’ve got to test them, you’ve got to check them. Just because a thought comes up in a quiet mind doesn’t mean that it’s right. Because we all still have those germs of greed, anger and delusion on very subtle levels buried in the mind. You have to be careful to dig those out, too. So on the one hand, we take comfort in the idea that we do all have the potential. To be awakened. And that the mind has this potential to be trained. It’s that luminous nature of the mind, the knowing nature, that allows us to be trained. But the doing has to be brought into line. So if you learn to do and to know in a skillful way, it’s going to lead to greater and greater happiness. So respect for the training means that we have to keep questioning the assumptions that come up in the mind, no matter how strongly felt something is. Our feeling that this has got to be right, this has got to be the way things are. Always be willing to question it. What if it’s the opposite? Turn it inside out. What if the opposite is true? To what extent is the opposite true? That way you keep yourself from having only, as he says, only one eye. Have two eyes, two ears. Learn how to judge things for yourself. Depend on the training. We have to apply the training ourselves. There’s nobody else who’s going to come in and do the training inside our minds. This is why it’s such a difficult path. Because the mind is what’s doing the training and it’s also what’s being trained. The more mindful you are, the more alert you are, the more you see and the better a trainer you become. Your sense of what’s skillful and what’s unskillful is going to develop. You get more and more refined, more precise, more accurate. It is accomplished through training and a lot of the training, as I said, depends on mindfulness, this ability to keep remembering the important lessons you’ve learned. And you learn those lessons from doing and knowing. It’s that combination of doing and knowing that you learn things. You see cause and effect. You can check your insights, because the insights are important in that they help you understand action, what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. You don’t ask the question, “Who am I?” or “How am I?” or “Am I?” The question is, “What am I doing?” and “What’s the result?” And that question arises out of easefulness. The realization that your actions do make a difference. So you want to be very careful about how you act. What your priorities are. The question of who you are or what you are comes down to a lot of different potentials. And the best potentials are developed by being very careful about your actions, being very alert to what you’re doing. And then, when you’ve learned a lesson, keep it in mind. So the next time a similar situation comes up, you can remember, “Oh, I did this and I got those results.” And the question of who you are just gets left aside, because it’s not important. The question is how you’re training the mind, how heatful you are in the training. Realizing the importance of all your actions. The mindfulness is necessary because, as the Buddha said, there is nothing so quick to change as the mind. He was a master of the apt analogy. But he admitted, in this particular case, there is nothing that is really apt to how quick the mind can change. Twinkling of an eye is too slow. That’s a real danger right there. Your protection against that danger is the combination of mindfulness and heatfulness. Which is why the Buddha said the ease of the… The heatfulness is the essential quality for developing skillful actions, gaining desired results. So it’s a combination of trust and wariness. The trust that the mind can be trained, and the trust that as you stick with the training, you’ll be able to see more and more clearly. The wariness is realizing that as long as there’s still any suffering or strife, or stress in the mind, you’ve still got more to learn. That’s the attitude that’ll take you far.

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