Good & Bad Potentials

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When you bring your attention to the breath at the beginning of the meditation, take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to energize the body and to call your attention to the breath. It’s so easy to overlook. And many times the breathing can be very subtle, hard to focus on. So make it unsubtle. Breathe for a while, really deep. And as long as it feels good, keep it up. And when it doesn’t feel good, you can change. Try to see what rhythm does feel good for you. It may change over time. Sometimes soft, gentle breathing feels good and then not so good anymore. It makes you sleepy. It makes you tired. Other times, heavy breathing is uncomfortable. So you’ve got to keep on top of what the body needs right now. And see where in the body you feel the breathing sensations. Sometimes long breathing is uncomfortable because there’s tension in some part of the body. What happens if you release that tension? Does long breathing feel better? Sometimes adjusting the breath is not a matter of so much of adjusting the rate of breathing as noticing which parts of the body are starved of breath energy, which ones are overworked, doing all the breathing work. And yet they’re starved themselves, which parts are just kind of going along for the ride. So make a quick scan through the body to see where the patterns of tension are, and whichever ones you can release. You might go down the body, comparing the left side to the right side, starting at the neck, going down the back, down through the hips, to the legs, out to the toes. From the shoulders down the arms. Take the body section by section, and whichever side seems to be holding more tension, allow that side to relax and allow it to stay relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. What you’re doing is trying to explore the potentials for a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, refreshment, fullness, right here in the body. If you’re sitting here all tense and tight, there doesn’t seem to be much potential for any of these things at all. But you do have some control in finding these spots where there’s a potential for ease and well-being, and learning how to maximize them, learning how to care for those spots so that they grow stronger. And they begin to connect. This way you learn a really important lesson about the meditation. It’s that things in the body are not just a given. You’re not here watching what’s happening on its own. It turns out the mind has a real role in shaping the potentials that come from your past karma. You’re learning about present karma and past karma. Your present karma is your present intention, and also where you’re paying attention. Your past karma is basically a series of potentials. There’s a potential for pain here, and there’s a potential for pleasure. That’s not just in the body. There are also all sorts of potentials in your mind, all the old habitual ways of thinking that you could latch onto right now. These may not be all that helpful. And then there are other qualities you have that are helpful. It’s not that anybody comes to meditation with zero experience and skillfulness. You have some mental skills. Think of a physical skill that you’ve mastered in the past. Even if it wasn’t mastery, at least one where you had to learn how to do something. And you learn how to do it from there. And you’re doing it fairly well, because you were interested in it, you were able to motivate yourself to do it, and you paid close attention to what you were doing and the results that you were getting. And then you learned how to adjust. Those are qualities you can bring into the meditation. Learn how to sensitize yourself to where the good potentials are in the body. In the beginning, they may seem pretty unnatural. They may seem unimpressive. But as long as something feels relatively okay, give it some space. So you’re not squeezing it every time you breathe out, or you’re not pushing it or pulling it every time you breathe in. Give it some space to be unaffected by the breathing process. And if you find that you can nourish it through the breathing process, so much the better. But either way, you want to find some way of taking that potential and allowing it to grow. So you’re looking at all the various skillful and unskillful potentials in the mind, pleasant and unpleasant potentials in the body, and realizing that there are different ways of relating them. That’s for the unhappiness. The unskillful potentials in the mind, just leave them alone for the time being. Don’t nurture them. And the same for the painful sensations in the body. Let them be for the time being. Focus on the things where you can make a difference, where you do have a sense of control. As the Buddha pointed out, our main sense of control is what is us and what belongs to us. It comes from that sense of control. We often find ourselves frustrated by, say, parts of the body, parts of the mind that sometimes seem under our control and sometimes don’t. Like your legs. When you want to walk, they’ll walk for you. But then as you sit down here, you suddenly discover they’re really stiff. So they’re useful in some areas, and in other areas you don’t have much control over them. But look at what you’ve got control over right now. Allow your sense of self for the time being to move around a little bit, change its shape. If there are pains in the body, just leave them be. Think of them as being outside your line of self, the line that defines self from not-self. And for the time being, establish a sense of self around the things that you can control, like the way you breathe or the parts of the body that you can relax so that you can energize and you can make more comfortable. Then you’ll learn that maybe the present moment is not a wonderful moment, but it does have potentials. And if you’re skillful, you can learn how to make the most of them. Then you’ll begin to see that, as the Buddha said, there are two kinds of pain, two kinds of suffering. There’s just the normal pain of living with something that changes. There’s stress and anything that has to change because its conditions change. And then there’s the stress and suffering that comes from craving and ignorance and clinging. Pain is just simply part of the world. You can’t do much about it. Learn how to let it go. The second kind you’re actually responsible for. You want to learn how to let go of the cause. The good news is that it’s the second kind that actually weighs down the mind. The first kind doesn’t have to. We make it weigh down the mind because of the second kind, because of the craving and clinging. But we have the choice not to. And it’s through the meditation that we learn where the boundary line is between where we do have a choice and where we don’t. Sometimes we run up against areas that we would like to control, but we can’t. We just learn how to let them go. So you’re not wasting your energy banging your head against a wall. Instead, you focus on the areas where you can control, can make a difference. Maximize those. That chant we have on karma, that we’re the owners of our actions, heirs to our actions, whatever we do for good or for evil, to that will be full heir. What’s interesting about the chant is that it’s used to develop a whole series of different emotions. There’s heedfulness. There’s a sense of confidence. And then there’s equanimity. Heedfulness is when we realize that our actions really do make a difference and we have to be fairly careful. Because the mind’s potential, through being really careless and heedless, can create a lot of suffering. A lot more than you might normally think. So you have to be careful. That’s heedfulness. But then you realize also that the mind has a big potential for putting an end to suffering. That’s the message of the Buddha’s awakening. So when you reflect on karma in that way, it gives rise to a sense of confidence. Then there are times you realize that because of the force of past karma, there are certain things you simply cannot change. Both in yourself and in other people. That’s when you reflect on karma to give rise to a sense of equanimity. It’s all the same chant, it’s all the same words, but it can be used in different ways. And you want to be able to learn which attitude is the proper one to take in any given situation. You’re getting hands-on practice. Heedfulness is the quality you want to develop when you find the mind beginning to wander off and say, “I’ve got a whole hour here. I can think about all kinds of things.” Just letting it roam like a cow that’s been penned in and all of a sudden has a huge pasture. Heedfulness is what reminds you that sometimes, out in the pasture, there are dangers. You have to be careful about which areas of the pasture you roam in and which ones you want to avoid. When you’re sitting here focusing on all the unpleasant potentials in your body and the unskillful potentials in your mind, you want to shake them off. Heedfulness helps you shake them off, and then confidence reminds you that you do have other potentials here. It’s not like everybody has nothing but bad karma. If your whole body were in pain, you’d be dead, or you’d be dying. But you’re not. So there must be someplace in the body that you can focus on and make more comfortable. The same with the mind. Even when unskillful emotions are roaring through your ears, you have to remind yourself that there are potentials in the mind for, at the very least, withstanding those emotions, not getting pulled by their current. This is where confidence is the appropriate attitude. And then when you run into things you can’t change, that’s when equanimity is the attitude. In other words, the teaching on karma can be used in a skillful way. We have to drop the teaching of karma from the Buddhist teachings because it fosters all kinds of unskillful attitudes. That’s simply because we don’t know how to use it. It’s like saying we shouldn’t have knives in our kitchens because sometimes people cut themselves with them. Sometimes people think about karma in a way that’s very depressing. Well, they’re using it in an unskillful way. Or they can get complacent. Again, they’re not using it properly. But that doesn’t mean it’s a bad teaching. It’s simply that they don’t understand it and don’t know how to use it. So as you’re sitting here meditating, learn how to think about karma in a way that gives you a sense of confidence when you need that, a sense of heedfulness when you’re beginning to get careless, and just rise to equanimity when you run into things that you can’t change. The teachings are like medicine, and you have to learn how to diagnose your illness and look at your potential for health. See what medicine you need and how to use it, because the medicines are all good medicines. And it’s up to you to learn how to use them in the right way. Use them for the right disease. So when you run into something you can’t change, just let it be. Focus on the things that you can change. Make better. Develop into the factors of the path. Develop into a sense of well-being right here, right now. Those potentials are here. Just learn how to look for them and learn how to develop them in a skillful way. And you’ll find that the experience of the meditation can really turn things around.

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