Potentials for Rapture

October 20, 2015

This body we have sitting here, in fact all of our senses, the Buddha says to see these things as old karma. These are the results of old karma. And it’s so important to understand that the results of old karma are like seeds. You’ve got a whole field of seeds here, which means that you’re dealing with potentials. Don’t see anything here in the body as written in stone. There may be pains here and there, but what you do with them makes all the difference in the world. How you turn those potentials into actualities. Because there are potentials for pains, there are potentials for pleasures, pleasant feelings in the body. It’s the same with the mind. The mind has lots of potentials right now. It has the potential for the hindrances and it has the potentials for the factors for awakening. And all the difference lies in the quality of the Buddha calls appropriate attention. For instance, there are parts of the body right now that are relatively pleasant, and there are others that are a little painful and might get painful even more so as the hour wears on. So what are you going to do about that? It’s not that it’s inevitable that you’re going to have to be pained by these things. It all depends on where you pay attention and how you pay attention. So we start with the breath, because that’s one of the easiest things to focus on, and it’s the part of the body that’s most malleable. In other words, you can do the most with it. You can make your breath longer or shorter, faster or slower, heavier or lighter. You can play with it in all kinds of ways. As the Buddha said, there’s a potential for a rapture or refreshment here in the body. You might ask yourself, “How does the way you breathe affect that potential?” First off, you have to identify it. The easiest way is to think of the backs of your hands. See if you can relax them as much as possible. And then all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, see if you can keep them relaxed. Don’t let any little waves of tension spread over the backs of the hands. After a while, there’ll be a sense of fullness that comes in that part of the body. It’s subtle to begin with, but it can grow stronger as you allow it to stay there and allow it to be undisturbed. Then you let it fill the whole hand, each side. Then see if you can allow it to move up the arms. Then you can do the same with the tops of your feet. Relax those as much as you can. See if that sense of relaxed fullness can spread up the legs. That’s one potential you’ve got. The whole difference lies in how you pay attention to the questions you ask. Of course, the questions you ask are going to be determined by your perceptions. How do you perceive this body you’ve got here? There’s a tendency, we mentioned it this afternoon, to have your sense of the body composed of all the different pains, and you’ve stitched them all together. That, of course, makes them worse. And it’s a totally arbitrary perception. You don’t have to think in that way. Think of all the spaces between the pains. Focus there. Allow them to become dominant. If working toward rapture physically doesn’t seem to work for you, you can work it from the other direction. The Buddha recommends if you’re focusing on the breath, and the body doesn’t become comfortable, you drop the breath for a little while and then you think about some inspiring theme. It could be a recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Something that you find is uplifting to the mind. Something that allows the body to calm down. And then notice, when you’re thinking about those uplifting themes, the things that make you feel inspired, how does the body feel? Then can you return to the body as it’s feeling that way and maintain it? In other words, there are times when your perception of the breath gets in the way, and no matter how much you try to manipulate the breath or adjust the breath, your basic perceptions are causing you trouble. Things can often get worse. So just drop the perception of the breath and focus on something else. Then sneak back into the breath through the back door. In other words, look at how the breathing feels. Look at how your sense of the body feels when you’re thinking something inspiring. In addition to the recollections, you might be thinking thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. Any theme that you find allows the body to relax, allows the mind to relax with a sense of well-being. Then notice how the breath feels, and then try to maintain that quality of breath. So this practice of paying appropriate attention is very important. It’s what you’re doing with your potentials here in the present moment. It’s your present karma. And your present karma is what shapes these things into actual experiences. In fact, when you really get to know your present karma well, you see that you actually experience it first, prior to your experience of the body, prior to your experience of the senses. There are certain intentions that head out to the senses. And you can take that fact that it is prior and make the most of it. In other words, you don’t have to sit there on the receiving end of everything. You can be more aggressive, you can be more proactive in what you’re going to be experiencing here. This requires experimenting. There’ll be times when you experiment in ways that you find make the breath feel even worse. Chalk that up to experience and go back and try something else. But try to remember that you can make the most of the fact that you’re active. The fact that the mind is active is part of the problem, because it’s our unskillful actions in shaping the present moment that give rise to suffering. But we can change those unskillful actions into more skillful ones. Without that opportunity, meditation would be totally meaningless. So as you’re sitting here, remember, you’re sitting with potentials. And it’s up to you what you make of those potentials. Appropriate attention basically means seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. You can ask yourself, “Where is the pain?” Or you can ask yourself, “What’s the path right now? What can you do to develop the path?” Focus on the pain requires that you have a sense of well-being, a sense of being here in the present moment and not feeling threatened by the pain. So you work on that first. See where those potentials are right now and develop them. That’s part of the duty with regard to the path. This is how you make your body into the path. Some of the Thai chants often talk about that. Make your body into a path. People wonder, “How do you make your body a path?” Well, it’s seeing that you can shape your experience of the body by how you focus on it, by the questions you ask about it, by the way you frame your experience in your mind. Then you develop the qualities of the body that really are helpful. That’s one way in which you can apply appropriate attention to what you’re doing while you’re sitting here right now. And you don’t have to wait until your concentration is really good in order to gain some sense of this. In fact, you have to shape your experience here in order to get the mind into concentration. Notice where the potentials are. And keep coming back, coming back, coming back. If you haven’t figured things out tonight, try again tomorrow, try again the next day, and then the next day. Until you finally see, “Oh, you’re doing it wrong.” But it is possible to allow the mind to be open to doing it right. That’s where you take these potentials and you shape them into something really worthwhile, something you can live with, something you can study. Because everything you need to know is right here. All the forms of what they call fabrication are right here when the mind is with the breath. All the potentials for the path are right here as well. So it’s simply a matter of familiarizing yourself with the potentials you’ve got here and, over time, making the most of them. That’s how the practice works.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2015/151020_Potentials_for_Rapture.mp3>