Potentials

August 1, 2017

One of the purposes of listening to the Dhamma is to learn of possibilities you might not have thought of on your own. For instance, with the breath. Usually when we think about breath, we think about air coming in and out of the lungs. But in the Buddha’s analysis, the breath is something that’s already there in the body. In fact, it’s because of this primary breath in the body that the air does come in and out. Without the energy in the body, the air wouldn’t come in and out of the lungs at all. So when you’re looking for the breath in the body, look for what’s already there. There are potentials here you may not have thought of. This is nothing mysterious or esoteric. It’s your basic sense of the body sitting right here, right now. What in English we call proprioception. And it has different qualities. There’s a heaviness, but there’s also a lightness. There’s warmth, but there’s also coolness. The breath is associated with lightness because it’s energy. Think about it for a minute. The breath is the first thing you sense in the body. We tend to think of the body as being a solid, and then we try to put the breath into the solid. But before you’re aware of the solidity of the body, you’re aware of the energy. It’s the energy that allows you to move different parts of the body. So you want to give that priority. Because when you give it priority, you can do things with it that you couldn’t do otherwise. As you breathe in, you’re going to ask yourself, “Where does it flow? Does it flow down? Does it flow up? Or do some parts of the body flow down while other parts flow up? Does it feel obstructed, or does it feel like it’s open and free-flowing?” The more free-flowing it is, the better it is for the body. So if you notice there’s a tightness or tension anywhere in the body, allow it to relax. And John Lee recommends starting at the base of the skull and the back of the neck. Relax the muscles there. Go down the spine. Other times though, he talks about relaxing your feet and thinking of the breath that comes up from the feet and goes up the legs. The advantage of perceiving the body as breath in this way is that you can do things with it that you can’t do with a solid. For instance, when you’re dealing with pain. For most of us, the pain is just there. We have to work around it. But if you remind yourself that the breath is prior, that you’re actually experiencing the breath before you feel the pain, then allow your mental image of the breath to flow through the pain. Because it can. And also look to see what parts of the breath energy are not flowing well that may not be right where the pain is, but may be causing the pain. Back when I was first ordained, I tended to have migraines. And I found that if I focused on the small of the back, releasing the tension, then I could help the pressure of the migraine go down to at least some extent. Sometimes the pain is the result of a breath blockage someplace else. So explore not only the area around the pain, but other parts of the body. In fact, it’s often good to focus first on parts of the body that are not in pain so you feel that you have a good foundation or a good beachhead here and there. Then as you’re going to maintain that section of the body, keeping it comfortable as you breathe in and as you breathe out, then think of the energy flowing from there to the part where the pain is, and then flowing through the pain. There’s a lot more to play with here than you might have thought. This principle of having potentials that are going to depend on what you do with them doesn’t apply only to the breath. It applies to all our experience. When the Buddha talks about the aggregates, he talks about how we fabricate the aggregates for a purpose. We have a potential, say, feeling or potential perception, and then we fabricate it into an actual feeling, an actual perception. A lot of times we do this unconsciously, but there’s an element of fabrication there. We do it for a purpose, and we’re choosing which ones to focus on. The same with the Buddhist image of karma. We have a field, and our old karma is like the seeds in a field. And our attention to these things is like water. So at the moment we have past karma that’s good, and past karma that’s bad. Potentials for, say, pain, and potentials for pleasure. And it’s up to us which we’re going to focus on. This is why the Buddhist teachings are not deterministic. Our lives are shaped, to a large extent, by our past actions. They’re not totally shaped by our past actions. Our present actions actually play a bigger role. In the Pentacore Rising, the Buddha talks about intention coming prior to the six senses and contact with the six senses. Well, that intention is your present karma. And what you meet up with in the six senses, that’s your past karma. So even right now, what your primary experience is, is your present intention. And that shapes everything around it. Which means you have the choice. If we didn’t have this choice, the Buddha said he wouldn’t have bothered teaching anybody. Of course, he wouldn’t have been able to find awakening. But it’s because we can’t choose between skillful and unskillful actions. He would teach people what it meant to be skillful and how to do it. Because for a lot of us, that’s what’s lacking. We want to be skillful, but we don’t know how. As for people who don’t want to be skillful, the Buddha had no time for them. He wanted to focus on the people who realize that they are responsible for what they’re doing, and they want to find a way out of the suffering they’re causing. So here he says, we have these potentials, and this is how you work with them. You do have the choice right now as to whether you’re going to suffer or not suffer. In terms of karma, you want to develop good qualities of mind that give you more freedom. The Buddha lists four or five, depending on how you count them. There’s development in virtue, development in discernment. There’s development in learning how not to let your mind be overcome by pain, and how to not let it be overcome by pleasure. And then finally there’s the Brahma-viharas, making the mind unlimited. He said if you develop these qualities in the mind, then karma coming from the past, if it’s bad karma, will hardly be felt at all. So this is giving a lot of power to your present state of mind. Again, it’s potential power, because there are skills that we have to develop. It’s not that we’re automatically able to not be overcome by pleasure or pain. In fact, that’s one of our big problems, is that these things overcome us. We do things under the power of pleasure and pain. As the Buddha says, we often go off course, either through desire, delusion, aversion, or anger. This is how we act in ways that are biased and unfair. It’s because we’re overcome by pleasure and pain. So the practice of concentration is one way of learning how not to be overcome by these things. This is a good skill to develop, to give you a wider range in your repertoire of dealing with the present moment, and also more freedom of movement. For instance, with pain, there can be pain in one part of the body, but you don’t have to focus there. You can focus someplace else. There are potentials for pleasure in other parts of the body. Make the most of those. And even if spreading that sense of ease through the pain doesn’t dissolve the pain away, at least it puts you in a different position vis-a-vis the pain. You’re no longer in the line of fire. You’re no longer in itself. You’re off to one side. You can be separated from it to some extent. And it’s when you’re able to separate yourself from it that you can begin to understand what is this process of pain. And it’s in the understanding that you really gain more and more control over whether you’re going to be overcome by it or not, because you begin to see your perceptions around the pain are the main problem. If it weren’t for the way you perceive the pain, the pain in the body wouldn’t be able to spread into the mind. So there’s something going on in your perceptions. So you want to look into that. Instead of seeing the pain coming at you, think of it going away from you. Instead of thinking of the pain as having a shape, leave it with an ill-defined shape. Instead of seeing it identical with the body or in the body, think of it being in the same spot, but on a different frequency. Then you find that your relationship to the pain has changed simply because you’ve changed the perception. And having the pleasure of concentration gives you an alternative place to go so you’re not overcome. Yes, you’re being overcome by pleasure. Concentration is good practice in that way because if you’re going to stay concentrated, you can’t let yourself get waylaid by the pleasure of concentration itself. If you do, you lose your focus. You lose your alertness. You have to remember that the cause for the pleasure is the fact that you’re focused on the breath. So you can’t leave the cause. Let the pleasure take care of itself. It’ll do its duty in making the body more relaxed. It’ll give you a greater sense of well-being. But don’t lose your focus. Because that’s the problem with pleasure. We lose our focus and we start drifting and we get careless and heedless. So the concentration helps, both with not being overcome by pain and with not being overcome by pleasure. It gives you new tools to use as you’re actualizing the potentials we’ve got here. Because you have to remember that the mind is not innately good or innately bad. There’s a belief among some places, especially the ones that teach meditation, it’s just sitting there watching things, that if you watch long enough, you’ll see that the mind is innately good. And there are some parts of the mind that are misbehaving that if you watch them, they’ll stop misbehaving. But not everybody. We have other potentials inside that are not so good. So you have to be very careful which potentials you’re going to maximize. In the body there’s a potential for pleasure and there’s a potential for pain. Which are you going to maximize? In the mind there’s a potential for going after sensuality and a potential for not. Which are you going to actualize? There are different possible perceptions. There are lots of different ways you could perceive the present moment right now. Which is the most skillful to actualize? You’ve got the choice. The Buddhist Dharma is alerting you to the fact that you have these choices and giving you some ideas about how to handle them properly. But the actual skill is something you have to develop yourself. But it’s a skill well worth developing. Because if you can train yourself not to be overcome by pleasure and not to be overcome by pain, it means you can learn how to rely on yourself more. Your mind isn’t so easily pushed around. There’s a greater range of powers open to it. So see what you can do with the potentials that you’ve got here right now. They may not all be the ones you like. We all come with our different aches and pains. But if you develop the right skills, you’ll find that doesn’t matter. There’s something skillful that can be done with whatever you’ve got.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2017/170801_Potentials.mp3>