Awaken to Your Potentials

January 4, 2025

It’s been a long day. It’s been a lot of work. Now it’s time to recharge your mind. In the course of recharging your mind, you recharge the body as well. As you get the mind still with the breath, and explore the potentials that the breath has, you find that’s good for the mind. And for the body. Like right now you can breathe in long, or you can breathe in short, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. These different ways of breathing will have an effect on your body, and an effect on your mind. You want to see when it’s the best effect. We’re exploring potentials here. As the Buddha said, there’s a potential for a rapture, or a refreshment. There’s a potential for ease. There’s a potential for putting forth an effort. Even when the body is tired, the mind doesn’t have to be tired. You can put forth an effort in the mind itself, based on that potential. It’s interesting in the passage where he discusses these potentials for each of the factors for awakening. He doesn’t say what the potentials are, just that they’re there. Explore them. They’re for you to find out. So be confident that there is a potential for ease in the breath right now. A potential for refreshment. Try to figure out what it is. If you’ve had experience finding it before, keep that in mind. Because that’s what the Buddhist teachings are all about. They’re all about potentials. Sometimes here it’s said that the Buddha awakened to the three characteristics. But in the descriptions that he gives of his own awakening, he never mentions those. He mentions the four noble truths. The three characteristics have to do with the way things are. The four noble truths have to do with potentials. What potentials those things have. As the Buddha said, there is a potential for a path to the end of suffering. Even in those aggregates that are inconstant, stressful, not self. You can put them together in such a way that they deliver you to places beyond them. That’s what the awakening is all about. It’s like a ladder that you build up to the side of a house. The house is solid. The ladder may not be all that solid. It can fall down easily. Maybe it’s made out of things that will break. But if it gets you up to where you want to be on the house, it’s served its purpose. In other words, the path will fall apart after you put it together at some point. But if you put it together right, it’ll deliver you to a place where you don’t need to depend on the path anymore. That’s what the Buddha discovered in his awakening. After all, it makes sense. Just awakening to the idea that the world is this way, the world is that way. Anybody can think in those terms, come up with a theory, and use logic to convince themselves that that’s the way things are. Sometimes you hear it said that that’s what stream-entry is all about, just seeing the way things are. Finally bringing to yourself that yes, the Buddha is right, things aren’t constant. But there’s nothing really special about that kind of conclusion. The Buddha, as I said the other night, was very critical of ideas that were just hammered together through logic or inference. He based his teaching on a real experience, having discovered a potential in these things that are inconstant, stressful in that self, that no one had seen before. That’s why his awakening was special. So that you can put the aggregates together as a state of concentration, and you can use them to create right view, right resolve, all the other factors of the path. And it will deliver you to something that’s not fabricated. So as I said, the Four Noble Truths are about potentials. You’ve got these aggregates, and you could use them with clinging and craving, and suffer as a result. That’s one potential, and that’s the potential that most of us follow. They do have their pleasures. The Buddha never denied that the aggregates have their pleasures. He said if they didn’t have their pleasure, we wouldn’t be attached to them. But the pleasures can go only so far. And for most people they say, well that’s the best we can find in the world, that’s as far as it goes, so we might as well contend ourselves. But the Buddha found that no, you can take them further. You can make them into a path. And the path leads to something that is solid. It’s not an aggregate. It has nothing to do with the aggregates, but it is a state of consciousness. He calls it consciousness without surface. The image he gives is of a light beam. The sun rises in the east. There’s a house with a window on the east and a wall on the west. The question is, when the sun rises and the light comes, where does it land? It goes through the window, it lands on the western wall. What if there’s no wall? It lands on the ground. What if there’s no ground? It lands on the water. What if there’s no water? It doesn’t land. Ordinary consciousness lands on things. This consciousness doesn’t land on anything. The word “to land” there can also be translated as “to be established.” They talk several times in the Canon about unestablished consciousness. There’s a potential. And there’s a discovery in that potential that the Buddha was awakened. That’s what awakening is all about. Even stream entry, you have your first glimpse of that. The image here is of water in a well. You can stand at the edge of the well and you can see, yes, there is that water down there in the well. But you haven’t plunged into it. With full awakening, you fully plunge. So we’re here to explore potentials, not just to decide whether we agree with the Buddha, whether things are inconstant, stressful, or not. There’s a story that one of the Western Ajahns tells about going home after having been in Thailand for several years. His brother asks him, “What did you learn over in Thailand?” He says, “Everything is impermanent.” And the brother says, “Well, duh, yeah.” Anybody can see that. But the Buddha saw there was something more important. That within these impermanent things, inconstant things, there is a potential to create a path to the end of suffering. And that’s not a “duh” kind of discovery. The story goes that the earth quaked when the Buddha gained his awakening. And when he taught his first disciple to give him stream entry, he too saw the deathless. And the earth quaked again. So we’re here to explore potentials. Right now you’re mainly concerned with the potential for the path, how to develop it, how to create this, how to take this breath that you’ve got right here, right now, how to take this sense of the body as you feel it from within, and make something special out of it. Something that’s refreshing, something that’s energizing. If you’ve been tired from the day, work on a way of breathing, a way of focusing that’s energizing. It may depend on how you breathe, where you focus in the body, what image you have of the breath. Because perception plays a very important role in concentration. Everything up through the dimension of nothingness, the Buddha calls perception attainments. And so what perception would be best? We’re getting the mind to settle in with a sense of awareness that fills the body. You can think of the breath coming in from outside, or you can have a mental image of the breath originating inside, because that’s where the energy of the breath comes from, comes from inside. You can ask yourself where in the body it starts. Does it start in one spot, or several spots? Or how about every cell? Think of every cell breathing in, breathing out. Inhormonal. What does that perception do? So you’re working with the breath, you’re talking to yourself, you’re dealing with feelings and perceptions. You’re taking these fabrications, you’re making them into a path, both for the immediate benefits of a sense of well-being, and also so that you can gain insight. You can improve your mindfulness, improve your alertness. And gain insight into how far these fabrications can go. So it’s not just a matter of deciding whether you agree with the Buddha or not. You’re trying to master the skill that he taught, to explore the potentials you’ve got right here. And see if you can arrive at the same place he did. And you know, because it’s really special, it’s one of the reasons why stream-enters have no doubts about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, because they’ve seen that, yes, it’s right. You follow the path taught by the Buddha, and it does lead to this experience of the deathless. That’s how your conviction is verified, and it becomes unshakable. The realization is that you’re alive. that overwhelming.

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