

Mindful of Your Potentials

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There's a Pali term, *dhātu*, that we translate as "element," "property," "potential." "Potential" comes closest to the meaning. There are potentials in the body, potentials in the mind. It's because we have these potentials, both good and bad, that we're not just stuck where we are. All too often, you hear that the point of mindfulness is just to be with whatever comes up. But things don't just come up on their own. There are also things that come up because we provoked them. In fact, a lot of the meditation is finding out how much of a role we play in provoking the different properties of the body, different potentials in the mind.

This is why mindfulness is not simply being aware of things arising and passing away. It's remembering that there are such things as skillful qualities. There's a potential for the mind to be skillful and a potential for the mind to be unskillful. If skillful qualities haven't arisen in the mind yet, you can be mindful to make them arise. Then you're mindful to keep them going. That's the other thing you're mindful of: Once something skillful is there, you don't just let it pass away and think that by seeing it pass away, you've gained some insight. You really want to work to see what potentials you have to give rise to something good and then keep it going.

As with the breath: Ajaan Lee sometimes talks about activating the breath. We become more and more sensitive to the fact that there's an energy suffusing the body. It's connected with the in-and-out breath, but there's also a background, cosmic hum in the body. As you pay more attention to it, it comes to the fore. When you get really good at this, you realize: How could you have not seen it before?

Part of the problem, of course, is cultural. Here in the West, we don't talk about breath going through the body, whereas in Asia they do. But it's a possible sensation that you can activate. So as you breathe in, try to breathe in a way that's comfortable. Don't squeeze the breath in. Don't breathe in so long that it becomes uncomfortable. Instead, try to figure out what way you can keep the body relaxed and breathe in longer than you might normally do.

As for breathing out, you don't have to do anything. The breath will go out on its own, until it reaches a point where you feel you need a new breath. Well, let it come in. Think of the breath as existing in the context of the body as a whole: everything from the tips of the fingers on up the arms, the tips of the toes on up

the legs, up the torso, and into the head. There's a potential for breath everywhere. See if you can allow yourself to imagine that potential.

We're not talking about unrealities here—simply there are so many things in life that you wouldn't notice unless you could imagine them first. It's like flying from Los Angeles to Europe. If the world were flat, we'd fly over Washington, D.C., or maybe New York. But the world is round. You have to imagine that it's round first, because the world, as you look at the horizon, doesn't seem to be round. Everything seems like a flat disc. But it's because it's round that we fly over Greenland to get to Europe. So to accept that fact, first you have to imagine it. Then you find various signs that show that it's actually true.

Well, it's the same with the breath. Allow yourself to imagine breath energy in the insides of your elbows, say, or the insides of your knees, different parts of the torso, in the back of the neck. As you breathe in, think of the breath coming in from the back and going down the spine. The potential is there. As you activate it, you begin to realize that you can make this a much more pleasant place to be in the present moment, simply by the way you breathe and by the way you conceive the breath. That perception, that mental image you have: That's what activates the potential. If you stick with it steadily enough, you see that it really does change things. It changes your experience of what it's like to be in a body.

Similarly, there are potentials in the mind. There's the potential for mindfulness, there's the potential for alertness, the willingness to put forth some effort—the mind can think all kinds of things. You want to learn how to deal with the mind's potentials so that you can think the thoughts you want to think and don't have to think the thoughts you don't want to think. That, the Buddha said, is when you're really in charge of the mind.

Sometimes you hear, "Awakened people don't think about the past, don't think about the future," and you wonder how they could function. I know some people who are afraid that if they hit awakening, then their mental faculties will go. That's not the case. The ability not to think is just one more ability added on to the abilities we have. We spend so much of our time thinking. Ever since we learned a language to think with, we've been chattering to ourselves all along. It's an added series of skills to learn how to calm the chatter down and get a sense of what kind of thinking is actually helpful, and which kind of thinking is not. So awakening doesn't impair your mental faculties. It just gives you an extra set of skills.

There are times when you're sitting here, and things appear in the senses, and you just let them appear. You don't have to make any commentary on them. Remember Ajaan Chah's statement: It's not that sounds bother us during the

meditation. We're bothering the sounds. In other words, we're the ones making a commentary on them. The sounds are just doing their thing. They don't have any intention to disturb us at all. The same with pains in the body: They have no intention. But our way of talking to ourselves about the pain, and our way of visualizing the pain to ourselves can create all kinds of problems. So there are times when paring down your mental activities is actually useful.

Then there are other times when you have to think. Look at the Pali Canon, the teachings of the Buddha, forty-five volumes: They're not the product of someone who didn't think. He thought a lot. He thought very carefully, very precisely. He thought very usefully. That was what was special about his thinking. He didn't just let his wheels churn. When the mind had something useful to think about, he'd think about it. When the time came to stop, he'd stop.

It's like having a place to keep your knife, like a nice scabbard. You pull the knife out, you use it to cut things, and then when you're done, you put it back in the scabbard. That way it keeps its edge. If we just use the knife to cut, cut, cut, cut, cut all the time, after a while it gets dull. The cutting gets less precise. You begin to mangle things, and you end up using a lot more strength than you ordinarily would have to.

So as we're meditating, on the one hand, we're paring down our mental activity, so that we can be just aware of the breath, just aware of the perception of the breath, the perception of the body. As for any other mental chatter, let it go, let it go. There will come times in the meditation when you do have to pose questions in the mind about what's going on, so that you can see, when something unskillful comes in: What is it that originates it? What is the provocation of that potential for unskillful thinking? And when the unskillful thinking goes, what happened? When it comes back again, and you latch on to it, why did you latch on to it? What's the allure? What's the appeal of greed? What's the appeal of anger? What's the appeal of lust? What's the appeal of jealousy? You want to look for that. These are questions you pose.

Then you look at the drawbacks of these things. And you can ask yourself: Which is stronger? Is the allure so good that you're willing to put up with the drawbacks? You begin to see that the drawbacks are pretty heavy, and the allure seems pretty foolish and hollow. That's when you can gain release from these things—through understanding, through thinking, posing the right questions, and watching.

But other times, you need to rest.

So this is what mindfulness is for: to see the potentials we have, to remember that we have these potentials, and to remember how we try to provoke the skillful

ones and dampen the unskillful ones, both potentials in the body and potentials in the mind. The Buddha calls this “mindfulness as a governing principle.” As you govern yourself, try to keep these points in mind, realizing that you don’t have to just put up with things. You’ve got to ask yourself: Where is the potential to change something negative into something positive, or to maintain something positive?

There’s the potential for positive breath energy in the body, positive thinking in the mind, positive stillness in the mind. These potentials are there. Sometimes you can look for them systematically. Sometimes you bump into them as you meditate. But the important thing is that if you notice a skillful way of relating to the body, a skillful way of relating to the mind, try to remember that. Keep it in mind. Add that to your fund of knowledge: the knowledge that you pull out to use in your search for happiness, in your search for well-being, well-being that harms nobody.

That’s what’s responsible about this path. We are looking for happiness, but so many people in the world, when they look for happiness, don’t care about the consequences for other people, or even the long-term consequences for themselves. They just go for the immediate pleasure, the quick fix. That’s being irresponsible. But if you look for happiness in a way that harms no one at all and yields a happiness that’s very long-lasting, that’s when you’re responsible. That’s when you’re an adult in your relationship to happiness and pleasure.

So keep these potentials in mind. You can really make a difference in how you relate to your body, how you relate to your mind. And this is the best kind of difference in the world, something that radiates out from inside.