

## *Habits of Perception*

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What have you got here in the present moment? You've got the body, you've got the breath, you've got thoughts, and you've got your awareness. But you're also carrying a lot of habits. In fact, this is the main issue in the meditation. If you didn't have certain habits of perception, you wouldn't be creating suffering for yourself right now. You may not seem to be suffering much, but there's always some stress that you're creating through a lack of skill. And this is precisely what we're trying to uncover as we meditate.

Some of the baggage you're bringing into the present moment consists of issues you've picked up in the course of the day: things this person said, that person did, things you yourself said or did. In some cases it's as if you've been a garbage collector, gathering up the day's trash. If you're going to get any peace in the next hour, you've got to throw it out.

But the issues also go deeper than that. If that were the only issue, you could go off and live alone where you wouldn't have to interact with people, and that would be the end of the problem. But it's not the end of the problem. When you go off to live by yourself, the habits of the mind start looming even larger. The less contact you have with people, the more likely your habits are to go out of bounds. You can get into some really weird feedback loops when you're living alone.

So the Buddha sets out maps, he sets out instructions, for how to cut through those feedback loops and to understand how your perceptions shape things in a way that brings suffering. He also shows you how to perceive things in a new way that will end those habits and cut through that suffering, so that ultimately when there's a perception of the breath or any of the sensory input you have in the present moment, there's no suffering added on. The input is the only disturbance you have. There's no greed, anger, or delusion to muck up the works.

As the Buddha said, the problem all comes down to ignorance. Ignorance of what? Ignorance of the four noble truths – and he's not talking about not having read about the four noble truths. All of us here have read about them and thought about them. Ignorance means not seeing things *in terms of* the four noble truths. We see things in other terms, the big ones being our sense of self, our sense of the things that belong to us, and our sense of the reality of the world out there – what exists, what doesn't exist out there. Once we place our faith in these perceptions, we become a slave to them. Our idea of objective reality places a lot of imperatives on us. Our idea of who we are places a lot of imperatives on us, and these are the imperatives that make us suffer.

So the Buddha teaches us to learn how to question those perceptions. There's a passage where he talks about how people are a slave to a duality or a polarity between existence and non-existence: Does the world out there really exist? Does it not really exist? He advises learning how to avoid that polarity by simply watching things arising and passing away in the present moment. Stay just at that level and don't get involved in the question of whether there's anything lying behind the mere experience of arising and passing away.

And the best way to do that is to give yourself a framework. This is what the four establishings of mindfulness or four frames of reference are all about: giving yourself a framework so that you're not blown away by the events of the world. See things within the frame of body, feelings, mind states, or mental qualities, in and of themselves. Make those your frames of reference – as when you're dealing with the breath right now: just the breath coming in, going out. In this context, thoughts have meaning only to the extent that they pull you away from the breath or don't pull you away from the breath. While you're sitting here, ideally that's the only question: how the thoughts impinge on the breath. Thoughts that are useful in keeping you with the breath are the ones you want to encourage. Thoughts that pull you away, you want to let go.

In the Buddha's words, you abandon greed and distress with reference to the world – the world here being the world of the senses. Only when you abandon greed and distress with reference to these things can you look at how they're directly experienced. See how sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations are experienced right here in the present moment, in and of themselves. If you can watch these things arising and passing away simply in and of themselves, the whole issue of what exists out there or what doesn't exist out there gets put aside. As you watch things arise, the idea that there's nothing out there doesn't occur to you. As you watch them pass away, the idea that there's something out there permanent, lasting, existing independently of you, doesn't occur to you either. You see that the issues of existence and non-existence matter only if you *make* them an issue.

The Buddha's not saying that things do or don't exist out there, it's just that in this mental state the issue doesn't occur to you. This is the mental state you want to develop, because all that's left is simply the issue of the arising and passing away of stress and suffering. That gets you right in line with the four noble truths and their imperatives: the imperative to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path leading to its cessation. These imperatives, unlike those of the world, are liberating, which is why you want to take them on.

The first one is to comprehend suffering so that you can begin to see what you're doing to give rise to the suffering. This is what focuses you on the real job at hand. You start seeing the fabrication of worlds in the mind, realizing that the world as you perceive it out there is really your own mental construct.

You have lots of different mental constructs about the world out there. Sometimes you think about the world in geological terms, sometimes in cosmic, astronomical terms, sometimes simply in terms of your own personal narrative, day to day. There are many different levels that are useful for different purposes. You want to put yourself in the state of mind where you can choose which view of the world is useful right here, right now, so you're not a slave to the imperatives that these different views put on you.

The same with your notion of self: Is there a self? Is there no self? The Buddha says, "Don't ask." So much of our life depends on the idea of who we are. If you really look at the arising and passing away of your sense of self, seeing how it's a construct just the way your sense of the world is a construct, then you're in a much better position. You can use different ideas of the self to function in different ways and then drop them when they're no longer useful. But all this is possible only if you keep in mind as your basic framework the question of what gives rise to suffering, what kind of action doesn't give rise to suffering, or what kind of action leads you to the end of suffering – the basic framework of the four noble truths, seeing your experience in those terms rather than in terms of the world or the self. Then you can see the activities that you do – the fabrications you make, bodily, verbal, and mental – simply as strategies, useful or not, skillful or not, in line with the imperatives of those four truths.

And that's liberating. On the one hand, you find that you can function a lot more skillfully as you open up to the idea that there might be more courses of action open to you than you had imagined. If you have a very definite idea of who you are or the type of person you are, you place limits on what you can do. If you have very fixed ideas about the world out there, that, too, limits what you can do in terms of putting an end to suffering and stress.

So what we're trying to do as we meditate here is give ourselves the frame of reference from which we can call into question our habitual ideas of the world, our habitual ideas of the self, to see how both of them are fabrications made out of the way we look at things, the way we attend to things, the way we perceive things. Similarly with the intentions that are based on those ways of looking at the world, looking at the self: We can start calling them into question, looking for alternatives, testing alternatives, with the overriding concern of seeing what we can do to put an end to all the stress and suffering we're causing through our unskillful intentions.

As you look at your experience in these terms – the constant questioning of what you're doing and what results you're getting out of what you do – you can open yourself to whole new dimensions inside. You can use your ingenuity to figure out new ways of acting, new ways of interacting with your perceptions of the world, new ways of interacting with your perceptions of self, that free you from the stress and suffering that deep down inside you think are a necessary part of being a human being. This is so much of what the Buddha's teaching is about: freeing you from your own self-imposed limitations.

Think of all those people who told young Prince Siddhartha that there was no way he could put an end to suffering. “The best people in the history of the world have all suffered in this way,” they said, “so who are you to say that it’s not necessary?” Still, the prince said there must be some other way. He had the ability to imagine that there would be another way, and the guts to devote his life to finding if it were true. And finally he found that, yes, what he conceived as a possibility wasn’t just a leap of the imagination. It was an actuality. This opened a vast new range of possibilities – for the whole human race – of what a human being can do.

Take, for instance, his analysis of the four types of action. Most people would only think of the first three: things that give rise to good results within the normal course of the world, things that give rise to bad, things that give rise to mixed results. But the Buddha found that there was another kind of action that leads to the end of action, to the end of suffering. That was his great discovery.

Notice: It was a kind of *action* he discovered, based on certain views, based on certain perceptions, based on certain ways of looking at experience, and then following through in line with them. So as we’re practicing meditation, remember that perception and attention – the way we perceive things, the questions we ask about the things we perceive – are the two main issues we have to focus on.

This is one of the reasons we put so much emphasis on concentration, for the levels of concentration are perception attainments. Can you hold onto a particular perception so that the mind can really settle there? See what it does to your experience. When you stick with the perception of the breath as filling the body, what does that do to the physical sense of the breath? When you perceive the breath as being able to come in and out of the body anywhere at all, what does that do? What effect does it have on the mind? When you get to the formless perceptions, such as infinite space: What in the realm of your experience right here corresponds to infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception? We investigate these things to see the power of perception, so that ultimately we can let it go.

So this is a very important thing to focus on as you meditate and as you go through the course of the day: how you perceive things. You can begin with simply how you perceive your interactions with other people. Notice how much of your perception of the situation is just that, your perception. We talk about the garbage we collect in the course of the day: How much of that garbage is self-produced? To put it really crudely, how much of it is just your own shit that you’re carrying around? This is not to say that other people aren’t behaving in evil, outrageous, or horrible ways. There *are* people like that in the world, but if your peace of mind were totally dependent on everybody else’s behaving themselves, you’d be their slave. You’d never get free. But as the Buddha said, the whole issue of suffering is something we can overcome through our own efforts. This means that we have to look at the suffering we create for ourselves.

As for what other people are doing, that's their responsibility. It doesn't have to impinge on us.

And as for the baggage we carry around: If we had to go back and straighten out all the horrible things we did in the past before we could gain Awakening, we'd never be done. But it turns out that when you simply learn to drop old habits, Awakening is possible. After all, the suffering you're experiencing right now is a combination of things coming from the past and things you're doing right now, including the way you're perceiving things right now.

A frequent image in meditation instructions is that all you have to do is turn on a light and the darkness goes away. No matter how many eons the darkness has reigned, all you have to do is turn on the light once and that's the end of the darkness. All you have to do is work on how you're perceiving things in the present moment and when things finally click, you don't have to worry about what other people tell you, you don't have to worry about the world, you don't have to worry about the self, you don't have to worry about what you've done in the past, for you've learned a new habit, you've developed a new skill. And the development of that new skill changes everything.