

# *Perception*

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That phrase in the chant just now – “those who don’t discern suffering” – sounds a little strange, doesn’t it? You’d think that everybody would discern suffering, but the verb here is important. Everybody *experiences* suffering, but not everybody discerns it. “Discerning” means to understand, to see it for what it is, to the point where you can let it go and put an end to it.

That requires looking at it very carefully. And for all the suffering we go through in our lives, we look at so little very carefully. That’s our problem. We have a lot of ideas about suffering, but have you ever stopped to ask yourself, “Where did you pick up those ideas?” Some of them go way back to before you even knew language.

The first thing that happened after you were born was that you cried – unless you were too stunned even to cry, and they had to spank you to make you cry. You even experienced suffering in the womb. There’s a story in the Canon about a young boy who stayed in his mother’s womb for years, and when he finally came out he was able to speak. The first thing he talked about was how miserable he was there in the womb, in that bloody prison.

So we’ve been suffering all along, and the way we dealt with our suffering from those very early times probably still has an impact on how we deal with it now. Say there’s a pain in your leg. You probably have a mental image of that pain – maybe a visual image, a tactile image, a sense of its shape. Back as a child, when you believed in ghosts, you may have seen the pain as a ghost. It was a *thing* with a will, and you thought it was coming after you. You didn’t know any better. But even though your conscious mind knows better now, a lot of your subconscious thoughts may not know better. This is one of the reasons why we have to meditate – to get the mind still enough so you can see these subconscious thoughts in action.

You have to understand that the mind’s not divided into two sections: the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. It’s just that there’s conscious behavior in the mind and unconscious behavior, conscious events and unconscious events. One of the purposes of meditation is to get the mind more still so that things that used to be subconscious can become conscious. It’s like bringing them up into the light of day.

Or you can compare it to tuning in to a radio station. The more precisely you’re on the frequency, the less static there is. The less static, the more clearly you can hear the signal. You pick up a lot of the subtleties you couldn’t hear before because the static was obscuring them.

You get the mind still so that you can begin to discern the suffering around the pain. You'll be working on two levels. One is the physical pain itself, and the other is the mental suffering. Doctors have shown that our perception of pain is really dependent on a lot of mental factors. This is something you're going to see as you meditate – and it's something that we can each know only for ourselves. Doctors can run tests and not find any physical basis for the pain in the body, but the person really is experiencing pain. They can look at the pain center in the brain to see whether it's activated or not, but they can't tell you how your pain feels.

So just the physical pain itself has a lot of mental factors, and the most important one is the factor of perception – the way we label things. Sometimes the word "*sañña*" is also translated as "memory," which is not really accurate. Memory plays a role in perception – we apply our old perceptions of pain to our new experience of pain – but memory deals with the past. Here we're trying to focus on the present, and yet we use our memories from the past to cover up the present, to shape our experience of the present.

Say, when there's a pain in your leg, a pain in your waist, a pain in the back, what perceptions does the mind apply to it? If you can't see the process in action, you can try consciously applying different perceptions. As you work in concentration, you should be getting some practice in this – because, after all, each of the stages of concentration, all the way up to the dimension of nothingness, is called a perception attainment.

For example, when you're working with the breath, the label of "breath" should be your primary perception. The label you apply to your experience of the body is "breath." Not only the in-and-out breath: Try to experience all the different parts of your body as types of breath energy. If your arm really were breath energy, would it be good breath energy or blocked breath energy? Just try applying that label very consistently to the sensation of the arm, and after a while your experience of the arm is going to change. Try applying it to all the different parts of your body. See how that changes the way you experience those parts.

You'll see that the actual physical experience of the body is going to change because of the mental label. And the advantage of this is that you can start doing different things with the sensations. If you perceive a particular sensation as something solid, there's not much you can do with it. If you perceive it as blocked energy, there are ways to unblock energy. You can figure out how to redirect it, how to loosen up the blockage. In other words, the perception is useful because you can do things with it.

If you stick with that perception of the breath, trying to keep it as constant as possible, you learn two things. One is that you get more and more sensitive as to what you're doing in order to maintain the perception. You start seeing the process of perception a lot more clearly. Two, you get the breath to calm down so that it's really, really still. Once the breath energy throughout the body seems to

flow nicely, it'll get more and more subtle. If you stick with your one perception, you find that the brain uses a lot less oxygen. And so you need to breathe less, until you finally get to the point where the oxygen coming in and out of your pores is all you need. The in-and-out breath grows still.

When the breath gets still, your sense of the shape of the body begins to change. The sense of boundary between inside and outside the body begins to dissolve away. You've just got a mist of sensations, and you can change your perception right there. Instead of focusing on the mist, you can focus on the space between those little bits of sensation, and all of a sudden you're with "space."

If you can hold onto that perception of space long enough, it's going to change your experience of the present moment, your sense of what it's like to have a physical body here. The potential for being a physical body is there but you choose not to stir up that potential. Just stay with the space. Just this much teaches you a lot about perception.

Or before you go to "space," you might focus on the different properties in the body – the warmth, the coolness, the sense of heaviness. Perceive the body as "all fire," or as "all water," or as "all solid." Just that perception will change the way you experience the body physically. Then perceive all these various properties as "balanced": not too cold, not too hot, not too heavy, not too light. Everything all mixed together just right. This will also teach you a lot about perception. You begin to see the labels you're using a lot more clearly. As you get more and more familiar with your conscious perceptions, you begin to detect the less conscious ones as well.

And you're ready to start taking pain apart. One of the first things you notice when you look at a pain is the sense that it seems to be a solid mass in the body. Is it really? Or is it the result of your perception? Try changing your perception to see what happens. Again, think of the pain as just tiny dots of sensation that can move around, that have space between them. The breath can flow through the pain. The blood can flow easily through the pain. Try to distinguish which of those sensations are just body sensations and which are the pain sensations, and you begin to realize that all the things you used to glom together are actually lots of different kinds of sensation. Only the way you perceived them was what made them so threatening.

You may have picked up that old way of perceiving because you thought that putting a boundary around the pain was a good way of dealing with it. Putting a boundary around the pain, you thought, might keep it from spreading. But when you really look at the process of putting up and maintaining that boundary, you begin to see that often it's an unskillful way of dealing with the pain. So you can replace that perception with more skillful ones.

Then you can look at the other perceptions and thought-fabrications that gather around the pain – the stories the mind tells itself about how long you've had this pain, or how much you've suffered in life, and "poor you": all this

suffering, all this pain. You begin to ask yourself, “Do you really have to believe those stories? Can you stop making the stories for a little while?” See what happens. Pain is an excellent place to start seeing all the different processes in the mind, because you begin to see that it’s not only a physical pain. There’s a lot of mental activity around the pain that can cause the really important pain, the really important suffering: in other words, the mental burden you build up around the pain. If you look carefully, you can see these different stories, these different perceptions, simply as events in the mind, and you can just drop the habit of listening to them and believing them. See what happens.

What you’re doing is not totally dropping the habit of perception. You’re applying new perceptions because you find them more skillful. This is the Buddha’s approach to all of the aggregates. You’re not trying to do away with form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, and consciousness – at least not right away. The first thing you’ve got to do is learn how to convert them into the path. They use the word “aggregates,” “heaps,” for the word “*khandha*.” You might think of them as big heaps of gravel. And you have the choice: You can put the gravel in a bag and carry it around on your shoulder, weighing yourself down, or you can figure out a way of turning it into an asphalt covering for your road. Put it down on the ground, mix it with a binding agent – and then you have a smooth road to walk on.

The binding agent here is mindfulness and alertness: learning to be very mindful and alert about how you use these different aggregates. After all, the aggregates themselves aren’t really things. They’re activities. They’re events in the mind. You begin to see that even your experience of form itself is affected by perception. And you begin to approach all these things by being mindful and alert. “Mindful” means keeping what you want to do in mind, keeping in mind your desire to put an end to stress. “Alert” means seeing if you’re really doing it, and at the same time seeing the results of what you’re doing. Both of these qualities require perceptions.

And then there’s ardency. Being “ardent” means that if you see yourself causing stress, you try your best to figure out other ways of acting. These three qualities – mindfulness, alertness, and ardency – are the binding agents that turn these events, these aggregates, into the path. And they require perceptions, concepts, in order to do their work.

So we’re not condemning the conceptual mind; we’re not condemning the mind that perceives things and puts labels on them. We’re learning to look at the process of perception and figure out how to do it more skillfully. Ultimately, you do get to an experience that goes beyond the aggregates, but the only way to get there is to develop this path – turning the aggregates from a burden on your shoulder to a smooth road under your feet.

So if you want to understand perception, the first thing you’ve got to do is learn how to do it consciously. The more consciously you stick with a particular perception – such as “breath” or “space” – the more you can understand how the

mind fashions perceptions. You begin to detect where to look to see the less conscious perceptions, the ones causing stress and pain. You see them in action and you can drop them, replacing them with other perceptions that are more skillful – until finally you get to the point where you don't need them at all.