

Perceptions of the Breath

March 23, 2010

To bring the mind to the breath, you need to have a perception—a label or a picture in mind—as a way of reminding yourself where you want to stay, and exactly what topic you're focusing on. Because all the states of concentration up to the dimension of nothingness are called perception attainments. You need a perception in order to stay concentrated on them.

As you work with the breath, you find that different perceptions work at different times. You'll also find that some are useful and some are actually obstacles to getting the mind to settle down.

So a few helpful perceptions are these. One, remember that the breath is energy, it's not just air coming in and out of the lungs. The air can be held, as when you hold your breath, but the energy of the breath can't be held. It can be blocked, but you don't really hold it. So even as you're holding the air in your lungs, there will be a flow of breath energy in different parts of the body. This means that, when we focus on the breath as energy, we're focusing on something that's very light, very quick, and very pervasive.

It also helps to think about the breath as something that comes in and out of the body very easily. Even when you've got a stuffy nose or congestion from a cold, there's still a subtle energy that's coming into different parts of the body. And it's like working around a traffic jam. If you know that the traffic is congested in one area, you drive through other side streets.

You can think about the breath just waiting to come in at any time, so you don't have to pull it in.

At the same time, you don't want to squeeze it out. Sometimes when your out-breath is too long, you end it off with a little squeeze. That doesn't really help. As you breathe out, you want to keep all your breath channels open so that when the body is ready to breathe in again they'll be open, just waiting for the in-breath. If you squeeze things out, there's a tightening up and then you have to loosen that up before the breath is going to come in again. That gets in the way of allowing a sense of fullness to develop in the breath energy. Even though you're focusing on the in-and-out breath you don't want to have a habit of trying to create a very clear marker between

the in-breath and the out-breath. They're all part of one element, and the element is continuous through time.

If you can think of the body as a large sponge or some other porous material, with lots of breath channels all over the place and then just hold that perception in mind, see how the body responds.

These perceptions are means by which one part of your mind communicates with another part of your mind. The Pali word *sañña*, perception, took on an additional meaning when it was adopted into Thai. There it can also mean an agreement—as when you create a language for the mind to talk to itself, and agree that certain words or images have certain meanings. So if one part of the mind asks another part of the mind, “Okay, where are we?” You’d say, “We’re right here with the breath.” “And where is the breath?” “It’s all around you.” It’s helpful sometimes to think of coming to an agreement with yourself that from now on, as you breathe in and breathe out, you’re going to regard every sensation in the body as a type of breath sensation. Even things that feel solid—think of them as just a blockage in the breath.

And here again: Where there’s a blockage, you try to find a way around it. Either think of it as a blockage that’s more porous than you first imagined. Or, if that doesn’t help, ask yourself: Where are the other channels around it? How can you bypass it? Where are the side streets? The main interstate is blocked, maybe you can find some side streets where you can get through, where the traffic isn’t so heavy.

I was talking last week to a number of people who said they had trouble getting their heads around the idea of breath energy in the body. Actually, it’s something you already feel, just that you don’t yet label it as “breath.” It’s not something that you have to create. There’s a technical term for this: *proprioception*, your sense of the body as felt from within—where it is, what your posture is, where the different parts of the body are. And from the Buddha’s perspective, that’s “form.” And breath is an aspect of form.

In fact, it’s the most important of the various properties that constitute form. There’s earth, water, wind, fire—or solidity, liquidity, energy, warmth. Don’t think of them as foreign concepts. Think of them as a useful way of looking at something you already sense: where the body is disposed, how it’s disposed.

And it’s very helpful to think of the primary experience of the body as being one of breath. It’s through the breath that you sense the other elements. So instead of holding the perception that the body is a solid that

you've got to squeeze or force the breath through, perceive your sense of the body as primarily energy. The breath is already there, prior to the solidity. It's how your awareness relates to the body in its most direct terms.

So there's nothing you have to force, nothing you have to move around much, just allow things to happen. If you find that there's a spot of tension, allow the tension to relax and you'll find whatever energy was blocked by the tension will move on its own. You don't have to push it. You don't have to order it around.

Ajaan Fuang would sometimes talk about filling up the body with breath energy, but it's not filling it up with air. What he meant, basically, was that when you breathe out you don't squeeze things out. You may help it breathe in, but if the body is going to breathe out, you allow it to breathe out on its own. You don't have to give it any help. Then you breathe in again. If there's any help, you help it with the in-breath and the out-breath will take care of itself.

After a while, as you do this, the sense of breath energy in the body will grow stronger. Sometimes it's possible to have too much. It can make you light-headed, and if you find that that's the case, you don't have to help the in-breath any more. Allow it to come in and go out on its own. Or you can simply think, "earth," to give things some grounding. And think of the excess energy flowing out your eyes, the palms of your hands, or the soles of your feet. Here again, you can work with the power of perception, because these pictures we hold in mind really do color the way we experience things.

So what we're learning as meditators is how to use that power of perception in a way that's helpful. What perception of the breath allows you to settle down? You have to explore. And "exploring" here means using your imagination and then trying things out, and over time learning to get a sense of what's working and what's not—along with what standards you need to use in order to judge what's working and what's not. When the mind's settling down with a sense of mental solidity where it feels at home, feels strong, effortlessly strong, you know you're heading in the right direction. If you're feeling strung out, you're pushing things too much in the wrong direction. We're not here to bring the mind to the brink. We're here to let it settle down, right in the center of things where everything is solid and well supported.

So the process of meditation is a process of experimentation, trying out different perceptions to see which ones allow the mind to gather around. As we mentioned earlier today, the mind is very much like a committee. Some perceptions will attract some members of the committee and other perceptions will attract others. You want to find a perception that gathers in the calm, solid, alert factions of the mind, the factions that really do want to put an end to suffering and are willing to do what's needed. As they get stronger, you find you'll attract other factions of the mind to your cause as well.

So find which perceptions are useful, which perceptions are easy to hold in mind, that allow you to stay with the breath, feel grounded in the breath, not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed but also as you're moving around. When you're moving around, you may want to focus simply on a smaller area of the body. Try to choose an area that tends to be sensitive to your emotional reactions, so that you can know quickly if something's happening in the mind. It might be in the area of the heart, in the chest, the stomach, right at the throat. That way, you'll be sensitive to when something has happened and you can deal with it immediately. If you can keep that area calm, open, settled, then it helps to take care of a lot of the other parts of the body as well. It prevents things from building up in an unstable or unbalanced way.

But essentially it's all part of your mind's own conversation. As the Buddha said, two of the factors of the first jhana—directed thought and evaluation—are verbal fabrications, the way the mind talks to itself. As you get the mind to settle down, there doesn't have to be a lot of conversation. It can be like the conversation between people who know each other very well. One or two words is enough: "breath, body, full body." Each is a mental picture. The sentences get boiled down to single words, single images. See how long you can keep that conversation going, and keep it on track, on topic. That's how the mind gathers around and settles into even deeper concentration—not because you force it down, but because you're providing a comfortable place where everything can settle snugly into place.