

Perceptions as Targets

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When you focus on the breath, try to be sensitive to the image you hold in mind of what the breath is doing, and of where you are when you focus on it. Use those images as your targets to help keep you with the breath. And notice the impact that those particular perceptions have on your breathing. If you find that the breathing is comfortable, you can hold on to those perceptions. If it's not, you may want to change them.

You may have picked up some ideas about how the breath comes in, how it goes out—and what you have to do in order to bring it in, let it go out—that may not be all that helpful. So try experimenting with your perception of the breath. One that I've found helpful is thinking of the body as a big sponge, and all the little holes and passageways and channels of the sponge are connected, so that when you breathe in, the breath energy comes in from all directions. There's nothing in the way. Then if you experiment with that perception and it seems to work, hold on to it. If not, you can experiment with a perception of your own devising.

Ajaan Lee has other ways of talking about the breath energy aside from the ones in "Method 2." Sometimes he talks about the breath energy coming up the back or coming up the front of your body. If you're feeling weak or your back feels sore, you might think of energy as coming up the back to give you support. There are lots of different pictures or kinetic images of what's going on in the body that you can hold in mind. What are the mechanics of the breathing here?

This issue of perception is very important. The Thais have lots of ways of translating the word, *sañña*, or perception. One of them is *kamnot*, which means to fix on something and to hold it in mind, as when you fix on a word and determine what its meaning is. They also use the word *maai*, which means to focus on something or to aim at something or to mean something.

This is very important because the mind tends to flow after its perceptions. The Buddha uses the word *anusarati*, which means to flow after or to drift after. And the Thai ajaans talk an awful lot about the currents of the mind flowing out to a

particular object. And we tend to flow out to a target, to something that attracts us.

It's like hummingbirds and the color red. There's something in the way their little brains are hardwired that they see something red and they go for it. You've probably seen them—if you've been around for long enough—hovering around the taillights of the van, hoping to get some sugar water out of them. There was an evening when I was sitting on the edge of the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. It was near sunset. There was a hummingbird that had been hovering around the campsite for a couple of days, and that evening it noticed my ear. The ear it looked red and it looked round. So the hummingbird flew over and stuck its beak in my ear. I could feel the tongue licking a little bit inside. Unfortunately, I didn't have any nectar in my ear for it to drink.

I remember seeing a documentary one time about a particular kind of beer bottle that was popular in Arizona and was killing off the beetles. As it turned out, the beer bottle, when it was empty and thrown by the side of the road, looked like a female beetle to the male beetles. And they would mate with the beer bottle. And it turned out that they would only mate once in their lives and that was it, so the species was dying out. Some animals are pretty hard-wired.

The human brain can be hard-wired about a lot of things, too, but it doesn't have to be. You can change your perceptions. When we go flowing out after things, we go flowing out after our narratives. When somebody attracts us, it may be because that person stirs up memories, and the perception of that person seems like a good target for our thoughts. The problem is that we're focused more on the perception than the actual person, which can lead to problems.

So however you translate *sañña*—memory, perception, label, target, whatever—the important point is that you can change them. We're not hard wired. The perceptions you hold in mind are a kind of kamma, an act you choose to do. This is why, before you meditate, the Buddha has you think about the perceptions of inconstancy and not self, to help counteract any unhealthy or unskillful perceptions you may have picked up along the way. Otherwise, your mind is going to keep flowing out to things outside. It's bored with the breath after a while and wants to go out for a little bit of fun, a little entertainment. It sees something promising but it turns out to be the taillight of the van or worse.

So you apply a different perception. If you see something as attractive, you apply the perception that because it's inconstant, it's going to involve stress. And it's not as attractive as you thought it was. There's *asubha sañña*, the perception of unattractiveness. If you think of the body as attractive, well, take it apart, bit by bit by bit. Then take the different parts and imagine them located in different parts of your apartment or your house. If you suddenly came across one of those parts, like a stomach in the sink or a liver on the radiator, what would you think? This way of thinking helps to dislodge whatever perception you may have that's got you fixated, that acts as the target of your thoughts. Suddenly the target doesn't seem all that attractive.

As for the perception of not-self, no matter how much you might try to control certain things, you find that they really do lie beyond your control and ultimately they'll leave you. The Buddha also has a whole series of perceptions for dealing with sensuality. The one I like is of borrowed goods: the person who borrows somebody's goods and goes around town showing off, to display how wealthy he is. Well, the owners can come and take them back at any time. Our sensual desires, sensual pleasures, depend an awful lot on other people being a certain way, providing certain things for us. And they can change their mind at any time. It's a risky business.

When you hold these other perceptions in mind, they help to cancel out the perceptions that have got you thinking and acting and speaking in unskillful ways. So when you find the currents of your mind flowing out, ask yourself, okay, what's the target? Where are they headed? What's the intention? What's the perception that's got you deluded?

At the same time, try to counteract them with perceptions saying that having the mind centered is a good thing. In the beginning when it's difficult, it's very hard to win various parts of the mind over. The different parts are all too ready to jump ship, flowing out after something else—any bit of flotsam or jetsam—that strikes them as more interesting, more attractive, more worthwhile. So you also have to develop more positive perceptions around concentration practice.

What this comes down to is that perceptions, if you don't examine them carefully, cause you a lot of trouble. But if you realize that they can be changed, that they're arbitrary—and that's the main point to realize about them, that the

perceptions we have of things are not built into the way things are—you can change them. That way, they don't become targets for the mind or targets for activities that are going to cause you regret later on.

So when you get used to playing with perceptions of the breath, learn how to play with perceptions of other things as well. Especially of things that have you attracted and fixated, and you know that those fixations are going to lead to unskillful habits if you keep holding on to them. Use the Buddha's various tools for de-perception, in other words, taking those perceptions apart, replacing them with something that helps to remind you that those are not things you want to aim at. You want to aim back inside.

So turn the currents of the mind back inward. Keep them focused here. You want to keep them fixated right here for the time being.

There will come a point in the practice when eventually you have to let go of even the fixation to concentration. But don't be in too great a hurry to do that. Ajaan Lee makes the point that a lot of people, when they start getting serious about the practice, want to go straight to not-self, letting go, letting go, letting go. He says, "Don't be in too much of a hurry. Work on the concentration." Push the envelope against those three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not self. Try to make the concentration as constant as you can, as pleasant as you can, as much under your control as you can. Because you're going to need this as your foundation, as your food and your nourishment, to withstand the attractions of the perceptions that have pulled you astray in the past.

Only once you've seen how arbitrary those are, can you turn around and take these perceptions apart: the perceptions of keeping the mind with the breath and this being your home. At some point the mind will reach a point when it doesn't need a home any more. But as long as it does need a home, make it right here.