

Name & Form

January 24, 2020

When you close your eyes and focus on the breath as you feel it, you're moving from the level of sensuality to the level of form. It's a step up. The pleasures that can come from the level of form are much more refined and much less likely to lead to unskillful behavior than the pleasures of sensuality. So try to familiarize yourself with this level.

The word for form, *rupa* in Pali, has many different meanings, but this is one of them: the body as you feel it from within. And it's composed of four properties, or elements. There's the flow of energy: That's the breath, or wind. There's the warmth: That's the fire element. There's a coolness: That's the water element. And there's a sense of solidity: That's the earth element.

We focus on the breath first because it's the element that's most responsive to the mind. You could say to yourself, "Short breathing," and the breath will get shorter. Or you could say, "longer," and it'll get longer; deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter. You can play with it.

It's also your first experience of the body. This is something we tend to miss. We think of the body as being basically solid because that's our perception of it. But one of the important things you're going to learn as you familiarize yourself with these various properties or elements is the role that perception plays in emphasizing one or another.

The body's not just plain sensation. There's going to be a perception behind the sensation. So here we're emphasizing the perception of "breath," holding in mind the image that the breath can be an energy. It's not the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's an energy in the body itself. There's a feeling of flow that comes in and goes out, but there's also the movement of energy inside the body itself. It emanates from the body—one spot in the body or sometimes several spots in the body—as you breathe in. And that can spread throughout the body. It starts in the body, but it can go everywhere throughout the body if you let it. And your perception of it is going to help. So if you have trouble feeling the breath in any part of the body, just tell yourself it's there. Whatever you're sensing is breath. And see if you can perceive it from that angle.

As for the other elements or properties, you'll be experiencing them to some extent as you're focusing on the breath. There will be parts that feel very solid, others that feel warm, others that feel cool. When Ajaan Fuang was teaching meditation, he'd say to can play with those a little bit, but you really get serious

about them when the breath has been taken care of. In other words, you've filled the body with breath energy. All the breath channels in the body are well connected, and the energy level is full so that you feel less and less and less need to breathe in and breathe out. The energy feels balanced, and it suffuses everywhere. It's so well connected that if there's a sense of lack of breath energy in one part of the body, an excess from another part will come right in to make up the lack. That's when Ajaan Fuang would have you think about the fire element.

It's the same sort of principle. When working with the breath, you start with one spot in the body. Make that comfortable, and then let that comfortable breath spread. With fire, you find whatever spot in the body seems warmest. You focus your attention there. Hold in mind the perception of warmth at the same time. And you may find that you're turning up the heat a little bit, which on a cool night like this is pleasant. Then think of it spreading. You can do the same with water. There's a sensation of coolness in the body. Then there's solidity, earth. You could think of the bones and, from there, think of the whole body being solid.

When you were familiar with each of these elements, Ajaan Fuang would then have you think of bringing them into balance: not too heavy, not too light—like Goldilocks' porridge, not too warm, not too cold—and then try to maintain that sense of balance. It's from there that he would then have you go into the formless states. But before you go to formlessness, you've got to get yourself really familiar with form.

So we work with these elements, one, to give a sense of well-being, but also, two, to familiarize ourselves with the body as we feel it from within, and to see the connection it has with what's called "name": in Pali, *nama*. In some cases, the word "name" covers just the other four aggregates: feeling, perception, mental fabrication and consciousness. In some cases, that mental fabrication gets divided up into attention, intention, and mental contact.

This gets us into dependent co-arising. All this is dependent on consciousness, and consciousness is dependent on this, and the two of them together are dependent on fabrication. Insight lies in seeing that: the extent to which your experience of the body, as you feel it from within, is shaped by your intentions, the way you pay attention to things, and your perceptions. It's not simply a given. And you want to be able to bring that fact out to the foreground, because all too often the perceptions are subconscious.

There was a period when I was meditating. I was away from Ajaan Fuang for a couple of months. And toward the end of the period, I was finding it harder and harder to breathe. It just seemed like everything in the body was way too solid,

way too unresponsive. The more I tried to breathe, the less the body seemed willing to breathe. I finally had a chance to visit Ajaan Fuang. He said, “Well, you’re focusing on earth.” It hadn’t occurred to me at all. And he said, “Focus on space instead.” That cleared up the problem right then and there. The lesson I learned, of course, is the power of subconscious perceptions, which is why it’s good to bring them out into the open.

There are some meditation methods that tell you that the way you experience the body from within directly is just pure sensation, raw data. But believing that hides the fact that it’s actually been processed. It’s like listening to a new story thinking that what you’re getting are bare facts when actually they’ve been chosen and massaged so that you don’t know the real events behind the story. If you’re told, “This is raw sensation,” then you’re not going to look behind it and say, “Well, what shapes the raw sensation?” But when you’re alert to the fact that it’s already shaped by your perceptions, you start looking for them. And one way to look for them is to challenge them.

Try other perceptions, and see the mind’s tendency to want to go back to the old ones, and the effect that it will have on how you experience the body, how you experience the breath, how you experience the other elements. This relates to the Buddha’s choice of the word “element,” or *dhātu*, “property.” In the physics of that time, these properties or elements were latent. And then, when they showed themselves, stronger and active, it was because they had been provoked. For example, on the external level, if you took a fire starter, you were said to be provoking the fire property, and a fire would appear out of the latent potential that was already there.

In the same way, the properties inside the body get provoked by your perceptions, by what you pay attention to. And the two of them feed each other. When you think of warmth, you look around to see, “Well, where are the sensations that are warm?” You pay attention to those. The attention and the perception will then magnify each other, and you’ve learned an important lesson: a lesson in cause and effect, a lesson in karma.

Those are the two principles that you always have to keep in mind when you’re listening to any of the Buddha’s teachings. When you read about mindfulness, how does mindfulness relate to karma? How does it relate to causality? When you read about goodwill, how does it relate to karma and causality? It’s only when you see these things in that light that you’ll understand the uses of these teachings.

Well, it’s the same with name and form. Name is the active side. Form is the more passive side. And you want to see how they relate to karma, how your mental activities—your perceptions, your acts of attention, your acts of intention

—shape the way you experience the body. Because it is possible to have name without form, but it's not possible to have an experience of form without name. There are formless beings, and although there is form, say, the form of dead people, there's no experience of that form from within. The naming activities have gone.

So we're here focusing on the breath because we want to learn about the mind. We're focusing on form because we want to learn about the activities of name, because it's the mental side that's causing suffering. But it's also the mental side where the solution to the problem of suffering is going to be found. And your experience of the body is a good place to learn a lot of these principles.

So try to sensitize yourself to the way the breath feels, and to what you can do with your different perceptions of the breath to give rise to a sense of well-being, because this is the purpose of the concentration practice: to give you a sense of well-being at the same time sensitizing you to what you're doing in the present moment so that you can be mindful and alert to see where craving and clinging are coming into the whole process, and how you can let them go.

This is why the Buddha said that those who practice mindfulness immersed in the body will see the deathless: because as they look into the body, their experience of the body, they begin to see more and more of the mind in action in the present moment. And through taking apart the activities of the mind, that's when you open up to something that's beyond name, beyond form.

So pay a lot of attention right here.