

## *Where Perceptions Can Take You*

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One of the basic teachings of the forest tradition is that if you want to understand the aggregates, it's not necessary to go following all five. All you have to do is focus on one of them. If you really get to know that one very thoroughly, then the other four are going to come running in right there: The insights you gain into the one will then apply to the other four.

Very often they focus on perception as the big culprit that's creating trouble in the mind. You read Ajaan Maha Boowa talking about his analysis of contemplation of the body, and you'll find that it took him a while to realize that the problem isn't with the body—it's with the perceptions around the body. There are times when you *want* to perceive it as attractive, and other times you want to perceive it as unattractive. And the wants in either case have very little to do with the actual body. It's more your desire, and the desire shows up in the perception.

Ajaan Chah talks about how he got started on really understanding what discernment was all about when he began to realize how arbitrary perceptions can be, and how useful it was to call them into question.

There's a passage in the Canon where Ven. Ananda comes to see Ven. Sariputta and asks him, "Why is it that some people gain liberation, and others don't?" Sariputta replies it's because they don't understand perception. There are four kinds, and they don't see their perceptions in light of these four kinds. So it's useful to know what the four kinds are and how we should deal with them.

He said basically that there are perceptions that lead to decline, there are perceptions that lead to stability, there are perceptions that lead to distinction, and there are perceptions that lead to penetration. This list aims at getting you to look at perceptions not in terms of just what they tell you about things around you, saying, "Well, this is just the way I perceive things" or "This means this." Instead, you ask yourself, "If I perceive things in this way, where's it going to take me?" And you realize: If the way you have of perceiving things is pulling you down, causing you to behave in unskillful ways, you've got to abandon it. As for the more skillful perceptions, you learn how to develop them, and then you realize there are levels of skill that you have to build on.

So you start out with the perceptions that lead to decline. These basically have to do with the perceptions around wrong resolve: perceptions of sensuality—in other words seeing something as really worthy of sensual desire; perceptions of ill will—seeing a person as being worthy of ill will; and perceptions of harmfulness—basically saying, "I don't have to be responsible for this person. I don't have to be careful around this person. This person doesn't matter. I can mistreat him as I want."

Those perceptions pull you down because you're going to act in unskillful ways based on them, so you have to do your best to counteract them. You counteract the perception of sensuality, of course with contemplation of the body. Or if you have sensual desire for an object, contemplate the drawbacks of trying acquire that object and holding on to it, and how much you're a slave to things if you let greed take charge in your mind.

The perception of ill will, you counteract with the perception of goodwill, but also with perceptions of gratitude: realizing that we're in debt to one another. Or at the very least, perceptions that other people love themselves just as much as you do. If you're happiness depends on their suffering, they're not going to stand for it.

The same with the perception of harmfulness: That's counteracted by the principle of kamma. If you harm others, the harm is going to come back at you. Do you want that? So you can't tell yourself that other people don't matter. You have to take their well-being into consideration.

So those are perceptions you want to abandon.

The perceptions of that lead to stability are the ones that get the mind into concentration. Once you've abandoned thoughts of sensuality, then the mind can settle down. But when it settles down, it's going to need a perception to hold it there. This is why we hold onto perceptions of the breath in the body—and why it's very useful to have perceptions of the breath as not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also the flow of energy through the body. Because, as the Buddha says, if you want to get the mind into right concentration, first you want to develop a sense of ease and fullness, and then you want that ease and fullness to spread through the body.

His analogy is of a bathman working water through a pile of soap dough. Back in those days they didn't have bars of soap. They had a soap powder, which was kind of like flour. You mixed it with water and you had kind of a ball of dough that you would then rub over your body. The bathman making this soap dough wants to make sure that all the powder is moistened, so that none of the parts are dry.

In the same way, the Buddha sets that up as the goal for what to do as you're getting the mind into right concentration: You want to spread the pleasure and rapture throughout the body so that none of the parts are dry. But he doesn't say how to do that. Ajaan Lee is very helpful when he talks about perceiving the breath channels flowing through the body and the different centers of the breath, and allowing the breath to flow from those centers out through the entire body via the breath channels.

Some people find that if they can focus on the center right around the breastbone, everything seems to fill the body. It's connected to everything else in the body. It's as if there's a system of roads, and the breath center at the breastbone is the main intersection. When something makes it to the intersection, and the intersection is open and unclogged, then the

results will spread out through the whole road system. That's one perception you keep in mind.

Or when Ajaan Lee talks about the breath going down the back, down the legs, you can hold that perception in mind. And then there are levels of breath energy: gross, refined, and subtle. You can hold those perceptions in mind as well, because those are going to help move you beyond just being stabilized to what the Buddha calls *distinction*: in other words, getting the mind into higher levels of concentration.

One perception helpful here is seeing that as soon as you start breathing in, there's a level of breath energy that already has flowed all the way through the body. Some people make the mistake of thinking that if you're going to get the breath to go all the way down to the toes, you have to breathe really long, to get it down the back, and then down the legs. Actually, one level of the breath is very quick: As soon as you start breathing in, the whole body has already been nourished. So you can hold that perception in mind—it helps make it easier to settle down.

Then you can start perceiving the directed thought and evaluation that you're doing as kind of gross—gross in the sense that they're burdensome, and that the breath is moving around, it's moving fine, it doesn't need all this thinking. So you just hold that perception in mind: that the breath will flow on its own without your having to help. It's basically because you've opened the channels, you've done the work.

Now, what remains is the perception that as you breathe, energy comes welling up from within the body, and then you hold that perception in mind. Then you start seeing the perceptions of pleasure and the perception of rapture as being kind of gross. So you focus more and more on the breath, and the breath gets more and more refined.

Then you finally bring the mind to equanimity—a sense of balance, to the point where it doesn't seem like the in-and-out breath is moving at all. The breath energy has saturated the body. Now, if you're afraid of not breathing, you won't be able to maintain that state. So you need another perception: That you don't need to pull the air in. Tell yourself that whatever oxygen needs you have are being met, perhaps at the skin, perhaps who knows where, but they're being met. You can hold in mind the perception the breath begins inside the body anyhow, so there's nothing lacking.

What you've done is that you've focused on one object, i.e., the breath, but you've changed your relationship to it by the way you perceive it, the way you perceive the body, and the way you perceive the mind in relation to the breath and the body.

From there you can go to even higher levels of concentration based on more and more refined perceptions. You begin to notice, as everything gets very still in the body, that it was the motion of the breath energy that gave you your sense of the shape of the body. Now that it's begun to calm down, the sense of the boundary between what's inside and outside the body begins to dissolve.

You're left with little sensation dots, kind of like a cloud, and you realize there's space between the dots. You can focus in on the space. You can hold the perception in mind of atoms: Atoms have lots of space between them, they have lots of space inside the atoms, so think of all that space connecting up without any artificial boundaries placed on it. That perception can get you into the infinitude of space, and you can hold that. You begin to think that the space that you're focused on extends through everything; it extends through the altar table, extends through the Buddha image, extends through the walls of the sala, the floor and the ceiling of the sala, the roof, the ground beneath you, out beyond to... you can't even see where the boundary is. You can hold that perception in mind.

Then there's the question of what it is that's knowing these things: There's an awareness. You can focus on the awareness encompassing the space. Hold that perception in mind. You begin to realize there's a oneness to that perception. Well, drop the perception of the oneness.

That's followed by another perception: nothingness. You can work your way up through the different levels of concentration to the dimension of nothingness by changing the perception. In this case you're changing the object of the perception—space, awareness, nothingness—but the relationship is the same: just holding onto the perception with a sense of equanimity, along with steady alertness and mindfulness. Those are the perceptions that lead to distinction.

The perceptions that lead to penetration, of course, are the perceptions having to do with seeing all things as fabricated and unworthy of attachment. You see that there's an intentional element that goes into everything you've experienced. You also realize that everything that's fabricated is going to end.

To induce dispassion toward fabrications, the Buddha sometimes talks in terms of the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self. Sometimes he gives lists of eleven perceptions, or of ten perceptions. "The undesirability of any world" is one of them. "The desirability of cessation," "the desirability of dispassion": These can all get the mind to the point where it realizes that it's been able to fabricate things based on perception, even its states of concentration. But these things are going to fall apart, so they can't be the ultimate goal. After all, we're conducting the noble search here. We're looking for something that doesn't die. Our perceptions die, fabrications die; the pleasure they create is going to die.

One of the images in the Canon is of a tree: If the tree falls down and decays, can you say that its shadow is going to stay the same that it was originally? Well, no; the shadow follows the tree. So whatever pleasure you get out of these perceptions is eventually going to follow the perceptions in falling away. That's when the mind gets inclined to what might be unfabricated.

Those are the perceptions that lead to penetration, that lead you finally to release. With release, you let them go, too. Because after all, they are aggregates. You've used them, you've taken the aggregates and turned them into a path, but the important thing to realize about all

aggregates is that they're made for a purpose. That's what the Buddha means when he says they're fabricated: Everything fabricated has a purpose.

Our problem is that our purposes all run at cross purposes. They're all pretty chaotic. We just sit there with these conflicting fabrications we've made and we think, "Well, that's just the way I am." And we forget we created them to begin with, and we had a purpose at some point.

So now we learn how to fabricate these things with a clear, coherent purpose, and a clear sense of where these different aggregates are going to take us. Because the present moment doesn't just sit in the present moment, it leans into the future. It, too, is for the sake of something. It's only when we get outside our space and time entirely, that's when you don't have to think about *for the sake of anything* anymore.

When something comes up in the mind—perception, feeling, thought construct—ask yourself, "What is this for? Where does this lead?" And have a clear idea that it can lead in these different directions: Either it can pull you down, or it can stabilize the mind, or it can lead the mind to even more distinctive levels of being stable, or it can take you to penetration, and on through penetration to release.

These are the potentials of these mental labels and images that we hold in mind. So learn how to appreciate that they really do make a difference, and they really do take you someplace—and do your best to fashion them in a way that takes you where you really want to go.