

## *Encouraging Perceptions*

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When we meditate, we're working with the process of perception. When we focus on the sensation of the breathing, we're also keeping in mind a particular perception of the breath so that we know what to look for, where to look for the breath. For example, if you have a perception of breath simply as air coming in and out of the lungs, you're going to be looking in one place and seeing one kind of thing. If you change your perception and think of the breath as energy flow in the body, you're going to be looking other places, seeing other things.

Perception is also used in gaining insight. Sometimes you hear that concentration basically deals with the perception or the mental label of something, whereas when you're developing insight you're dealing with the actual experience, but that's not the case. The two go together, the perception and the experience, both in concentration practice and in insight practice. When you're trying to concentrate, you use the perception of the breath to direct you to the experience of the breath and to keep you there. When you're starting to develop a sense of dispassion, you use the perception of inconstancy, or the perception of stress, or the perception of not-self. These are mental labels and you're applying them to things you're experiencing.

One of the important lessons you learn from meditation is the power of perception, how it can shape your experience: what you sense in your world of experience, both inside the body and around you; where you're going to focus your attention and what you're going to do with it; your sense of your possibilities, of what can be done. Again, if you think of the breath as simply the air coming in and out of the lungs, there's a limited range of possibilities for what you can do. The idea of allowing the in-and-out breath to stop gets kind of scary. But if you think of the breath energy flowing throughout the body, extending out to all the pores, then the idea of the in-and-out breath stopping is not so scary. If you think of yourself as starved of breath, you have to keep gulping it in. You're going to breathe in a way that's not very conducive to getting the mind to settle down. But if you develop a perception of the body being filled with breath energy, then the in-breath is just connecting with what's already there, energizing what's already there, and you're going to breathe in a different way, with a lot less desperation, with a greater sense of fullness and ease. What's called the bodily fabrication aspect of the in-and-out breath has an impact on the movement of energy in the body, and the way you feel the body is going to get more and more subtle, more conducive to the mind's settling down.

All these perceptions are true to some extent, it's just that some of them are more useful than others, more beneficial, for some purposes and not for others. For the purpose of meditating, you want to hold onto a perception that's right for what you're doing right now. In this way, the perceptions you hold in the mind are a kind of mental chatter, a kind of inner speech—the words that go into the sentences of your directed thought and evaluation—and the same principles apply to inner speech as the Buddha applies to outer speech. In other words, before speaking, you have to ask yourself three questions. The first question is, is it true? There are all kinds of things that are true. So, the next question is, is it beneficial? Is it really good to say these things? Is it really good to hold these perceptions? What use do they have? What impact do they have on the mind? Even though they may be true, if they're not having a beneficial impact on the mind, you might want to let them go. But even if they're beneficial, the next question is, is this the right time and place for them? Is this the time for comforting perceptions or is this the time for perceptions that crack the whip?—the ones that say, "Hey, you've got to get to work." These are the sorts of things you learn through experience. But for the purposes of the meditation right now, you want to hold to a perception of the breath that allows the mind to settle down, so that it doesn't have to think a lot about breathing in, breathing out. You want perceptions that

simply *allow* the breath to come in, *allow* it to go out.

So, a perception of the ease of the breath, the fullness of the breath is very helpful. At the same time, you need some useful perceptions about your own mind. You have to be convinced that you can do this. As Ven. Ananda said, this is a form of conceit, but it's a healthy form of conceit. You hear that other people have gained awakening and you tell yourself, "They're human beings. I'm a human being. They can do it, so can I." But sometimes you're fighting some perceptions you've carried over from the past that tend to undercut that kind of self-confidence. So again, this is a question: However true they may have been, are they beneficial right now? No. So you've got to figure out ways to let them go.

Ajaan Mun would do this with his students. He himself was the son of a peasant; most of his students were peasants' sons, and peasants in Thailand are way down on the social ladder. The message coming out of Bangkok in those days was that if you wanted to get anywhere in the Buddha's teachings, you had to go to Bangkok and study with the experts there: Bangkok people from the royal family, people from educated backgrounds. If you're just a peasant son meditating out under the trees, what would you know? A lot of people in the countryside had internalized that message, so Ajaan Mun's first task was to counteract it. One of his frequent teachings was, "What do you need in order to practice? You need a human birth: you've got that. You need the 32 parts of the body. Sometimes you don't have to have all 32 functioning properly, but you've got a human body and you've got a human mind. You've got what it takes." You see this repeated again and again in his teachings. He had to build up the confidence of his students, and Yes: Even though they were peasants and had had minimal education, they had enough. They had what it takes. This is why we have the Wilderness Tradition. They were able to overcome the messages that society had been sending to them.

You need confidence in order to do this. One helpful perception is not to think of yourself as a unitary self, but as many selves. You've had many desires. Each desire has its own set of selves, the self that's going to gain the desired pleasure and then the self that can manage things to produce that pleasure. Now, in many areas of life, we may not have many skills, in which case that second kind of self may be pretty underdeveloped. But you have to think about the fact that you do have some skills, there are some things that you do well, and so think of those as the strong members of your committee. Then learn to take the lessons they've learned in managing things skillfully and apply them to your meditation. This is a skill that requires time, requires patience, so that we can comprehend suffering, let go of its cause, develop the path so that we can experience or verify for ourselves that there is a cessation to suffering. The hard part here is comprehending the pain, because pain, both physical and emotional, is something we tend to run away from. Who wants to sit around with pain long enough so you can comprehend it? So you need skills. You need strengthening factors.

This is what the path is all about, from right view all the way down to right concentration. The factors of the path are there to strengthen you, to encourage you, to give you the skills you need to sit with suffering, sit with pain, and understand it. So, again, whatever perceptions, whatever ways of talking to yourself that are true but may not be beneficial, or may not be timely, you've got to learn how to drop them.

Sometimes you have a big investment in them and sometimes they've been drummed into your head so long you can't think of any other alternative. That's when you've got to remember that you do have skills, you do have abilities, so focus on those, build on your strengths. Again, don't perceive yourself just as a unitary being. You've got all these committee members in here, so try to figure out which ones are skillful, which ones are going to be helpful right now, and encourage them so that you have the strength to look at your suffering.

This is why we work so much on concentration, because the concentration develops a sense of ease, a sense of rapture, a sense of stability. It's nourishing for the mind, strengthening for the mind.

There are also other objects of concentration beside the breath, meditation exercises that can be helpful when you need them. For example, reflection on your own generosity, reflection on your own virtue, recollection of the Sangha, remembering all those monks and nuns who went through a lot of difficulties. Some of them were on the verge of suicide and yet they were able to pull themselves together and ultimately

gain awakening. That's encouraging. They could do it, why can't you? Any of the contemplations that you find encouraging and strengthening, you've got to learn how to develop them. If there's a nagging voice in the back of the mind that says, "Well, that may be true of them but it's not really true of me," you've got to recognize that voice for what it is, something that's unbeneficial, and only telling part of the truth, for a purpose you can't trust. You may have some weaknesses but you've also got strengths. Don't let the cynic take over, because the cynic wants to destroy you. It doesn't want to practice. It's a member of the committee that you can't allow to have any power. You need to learn how to undermine its power so that it doesn't get in the way of the strengthening exercises that we do as we practice, as we meditate, as we develop mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment.

All these things are meant to help us comprehend suffering so that we can understand how it comes, how it goes, and realize where the cause is. There may be a lot of causes coming from outside, but the things that really harm us, that really hurt us, are the ways we cause ourselves to suffer. Sometimes that's hard to admit to yourself, but that's another reason why you need inner strength: so you can look at your own feelings and not get knocked off course by them, not get overwhelmed by them. It helps to realize that everybody does this, everybody's harming themselves, causing themselves suffering; the only people who aren't are arahants.

So we're all in this together. But we don't have to stay here.

The sense of accomplishment that comes when the mind can settle down, the sense of ease that comes: These are all things that help you to step back, to look at the ways in which the unskillful members of your committee have been causing a lot of trouble. One of the uses of the not-self teaching is learning how to dis-identify with these members, to watch them simply as patterns of behavior, old conversations, old movies, old habits that you haven't had a real chance to look at carefully, but now you can. You want to develop the imagination that helps you think of other ways of dealing with a particular problem so that you don't have to make yourself suffer. That's when you see that the type of behavior you're doing is causing yourself suffering, and also that it's not necessary. After all, it's just a type of action. It's not built into your essence. There are alternatives. When you see them, that's when you can really let go.

This requires patience. It requires endurance. It requires self-confidence. Any perceptions that help in this project of giving you more strength are the ones you want to hold onto. Those are the ones you want to develop. That way you'll have the confidence that, like Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Mun's students, you can do it, too. After all, they were human beings with a lot of strikes against them but they were able to take to heart the fact that they were causing themselves to suffer and that the path to the end of suffering was something everybody can follow. Those are good perceptions to keep in mind.