

The Power of Perception

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There is a Pali word, *nimitta*, which is often translated as “sign,” meaning a visual image that appears in your meditation. But that’s not how it’s used in the Canon. In the Canon, Sister Dhammadinna said—and the Buddha confirmed what she said—that the four *nimitta* of right concentration are the four frames of reference or four establishings of mindfulness: keeping track of the body in and of itself, keeping track of feelings in and of themselves, keeping track of the mind in and of itself, keeping track of mental qualities in and of themselves. Those are the targets of your meditation. Those are what you take as your theme. And you maintain that theme by having a perception. As the Buddha said, that’s how we get from the very beginning levels of concentration, all the way up to the perception of nothingness. The power of perception takes you pretty far.

You hold a label in your mind and apply it to what you’re experiencing. The label can be a mental picture, a feeling, a word, or even just a kinetic sense that you have of the breath in the body. In other words, you might have a mental picture of how the breath goes into the body. Or you may create a particular feeling through the breath. You can focus on a point someplace around the middle of the chest and find a quality of feeling there that feels nice. You try to maintain that niceness, that pleasant feeling, so that nothing in the in-breath and nothing in the out-breath touches it or disturbs it.

This is where the Buddha’s image of holding a baby chick in your hand comes in handy. You gently hold that nice feeling all way through the in-breath, and all the way through the out-breath, adjusting your breathing so that it doesn’t disturb the feeling. Or you can just keep in mind the word “breath,” “breath,” “breath,” as a way of reminding yourself not to leave the breath, when something else comes up. Or the general feeling you have of the breath coursing through the body: That can be your perception, your mental label. But to stay with the breath, you need a label of some kind. It can be one of these, or something else.

Your ability to keep that labeling in mind is where mindfulness comes in. At the same time, the label is what mindfulness needs as a sign to remember. That’s how mindfulness works together with the perception.

So these two qualities of perception and mindfulness help each other along. As you get them more and more stable, you can stay more consistently with the breath. This gives you an important lesson: the power that perception has in shaping your experience. The English word, “perception,” is an awkward word to use, because it has two very distinct meanings. One is just basically registering sense data, as in being able to register data at the senses. And the other is the label you put on something, identifying something, such as perceiving a dog to be a dog. The second meaning is what’s meant here. When there are feelings in the body, you can perceive them as breath feelings or you can perceive them as solid feelings. And your choice of perception is going to have an effect on what you can actually do with those sensations. There are things you can do with breath sensations that you can’t do with solid sensations. So perceiving them as breath sensations expands your range of possibilities.

This is why it’s useful to hold in mind the idea that whatever you’re experiencing in your inner sense of the body is related to the breath, either the in-and-out breath, or else the breath energy field that’s more in the background. If you think of the body as being a solid lump and you’ve got to pump the breath into it, that’ll affect the way you breathe, affect the level of pleasure you can get out of the breath. It restricts a lot of your possibilities. But if you think of the whole body as a breath energy field, you can breathe in and out of various places that you might not have thought of before: breathing out of the sides of your rib cage; thinking of the breath coming in from the left and the right as you breathe in and going out the chest you breathe out. Or you can breathe in and out of the shoulders, in and out of the eyes.

See if there’s someplace in the body that you’ve never thought of as breath before, and experiment with it: As you breathe in, think of the breath energy coming in right there. You don’t have to pull it from anywhere

else. It just comes straight in through the skin. And notice which parts of the body, when you do this, have an especially good effect on how you experience the breathing, so that it feels more fulfilling, as opposed to struggling to get the breath in or to move the breath around. The breath energy is already there and it's simply a matter of nourishing it, filling up a little bit. You may find that you have a tendency to over-define where the different parts the body are, or over-define the edges of the breath, so loosen that up a bit. Think of the body as a field of energy and the breath can move around in places you might thought of being impossible before.

Now, you might say, What's all this playing around doing here? Aren't we supposed to be here just accepting things as they are? Well, part of learning about things as they are is beginning to realize that you're shaping a lot of what you thought was just "as they are," just a given in your experience. If everything were already given, already determined, you'd really be hampered. You'd really be constricted. You'd have no effect on the present at all. But that's not the way things are. If you perceive things that way, you're going to miss out on a lot of what you're actually doing. A lot of mental actions are happening behind the scenes that you might be missing.

So open up the mind to the idea that you're actually shaping things here. And the best way to actually see that in action is to consciously work on shaping the way you perceive things, these labels, these images you hold in your mind as they relate to the breath. You begin to see in action what the Buddha was talking about, which is that if you're going to have an actual perception, an actual feeling of the form of the body, or the feeling tones of pleasure or pain, you have to fabricate them from the raw material coming from your past. These things exist in a potential form, coming in from your past kamma, which places some limitations on the range of your choices. But to actually have a feeling, actually have a perception, requires an intention, a *sankhara*, a fabrication that occurs in the present moment.

These aggregates the Buddha talks about are activities. There is an intentional element in them. Really to accept what's going on doesn't mean just accepting them as a given. It means accepting the fact you've had a hand in shaping them. You want to see that in action. If you don't see that in action, you've got a huge blind spot here in the present moment. And it's not just a spot. It's an enormous field of blindness surrounding what you think is happening, and which the mind is disguising from itself. The fact is, what's hidden by that field of blindness is precisely what you need to know to gain release.

So to work through that blind field, ask yourself: What perception are you holding in mind regarding the breath? When you breathe in, what do you think is happening? What image do you have?—whether it's a kinetic image, a visual image, or just a word. And what would happen if you could change that image in a way that allows the breath to move in areas that have been restricted before? If you find a particular perception that helps you settle down more firmly, with greater sense of wellbeing, solidity, and resilience here in the present moment, use that perception as long as it's skillful. If you come across something that gets even better results, use that one, too. Realize that, as a meditator, you should have lots of different tools at hand. There's no one right tool that you can use without having to evaluate it. You can't just put the mind through the meat grinder to get what you want out of the other end. There's no one guaranteed method that can do all the work. After all, do you have only one defilement or do your defilements have only one trick, one strategy? They have lots of strategies, lots of tricks, and so you have to have the strategies and tricks to deal with whatever they come up with, which means that you need a wide range.

One of the important tools you're going to need as you practice is learning how to use different perceptions to get the mind more firmly planted in the breath, to the point where everything settles down, the breath really stops, and there's just a feeling of solid energy that's not moving in any way, but feels sufficient in and of itself.

That's when you can start playing with the perception around the form of the body. See what happens when you erase any perception of a boundary around the body. Replace the perception of "body" with a perception of space permeating throughout the atoms of the body. There are lots of things you can play with. From space, you can apply the perception of knowing, knowing, knowing. Mindfulness is what allows you to

keep these perceptions in place, mindfulness combined with alertness and your determination not to let the perception budge. This is the only way we get to see the power of perception: by holding onto a perception for a long period of time.

This is why we try to develop mindfulness as an important part of the practice: this ability to keep something in mind. Once you've got a good perception, just hold onto it and see where it goes. This is how you learn to master the various tools you need as a meditator, and you get insight into the process of perception, the process of fabrication. Your concentration practice begins to contain within it a lot of the lessons you're going to need for discernment.

So try to be very conscious of the process of perception. What perceptions are you holding in mind right now? And what are they doing, in terms of the breath, in terms of feelings? Do you like what they're doing, or are you not sure? If you're not sure, hold onto them for a while and see what happens. Then try a perception that turns the first one inside out, and hold onto that one for a while. The only way you're going to learn how to meditate is to experiment like this. Because after all, we're here to see something we've never seen before, to attain something we've never attained before. That means doing things you've never done before. And the doing, of course, is the doing that's going on in the mind.

So right here is one way of getting more and more sensitive to that doing: by working with these perceptions and seeing what they do, and developing sensitivity to know where you're doing something well or something not, something helpful or something not. If you bring the attitude that you're here to learn, then you can learn something new each time you meditate, each time you breathe.