

## *Coming into the Present*

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Experience changes so fast. And there are so many facets to it. The Buddha once said that whatever you have a concept of, no matter how you conceive it, it's always already otherwise. In other words, by the time you've come up with a concept for what you're experiencing, the experience has already changed. Things keep changing so fast. So we are going to throw out concepts? That's not the Buddha's approach. Even though concepts are crude and may not encompass reality, concepts do function. They're a part of reality, too, you know. And just as everything else in the world is part of a cause and effect network, the concepts you hold in your mind come from causes and have their effects.

This is how the Buddha judges them. There are some concepts that are blatantly false, either because the intention behind them is to misrepresent or because you're really clueless as to what's going on. There are other concepts that are relatively true, but they're not useful. They have a bad effect if you hold on to them. Then there are concepts that are true and have a good effect. In other words, they help overcome suffering. These are concepts to be developed—the concepts of right view, the perceptions you use in the practice. The Buddha picked out the concepts and perceptions that really are helpful and said that they should be developed because they do have an impact on the mind—a beneficial, salutary impact on the mind.

The practice of concentration he calls a perception attainment. In other words, you gain concentration by holding onto a particular concept, perception, or label in the mind. Even though that label may not be a totally adequate description of what's going on, you're using it because it'll have a good impact on the mind. For instance, with the breath: You focus on the breath coming in and going out. As you do that, there's always the question of which of your sensations in the body right now are related to the breath. A lot of it depends on your perception, the way you conceive of the breath. If you think of the body as a big bellows, and the breath simply as the air coming in and out, you're going to have one series of perceptions around the breath. You've got this solid body, or this relatively solid body, which can't be permeated by breath just like the bellow is not, and then there's the big space inside where the breath comes in, goes out the tiny nozzle. That's one way of perceiving the breath.

But then you notice that there are these other feelings that flow through the body as you breathe in and breathe out. What are you going to do with them? Are

they useful to focus on or not? As Ajaan Lee pointed out, you can really get the mind into a good state of concentration if you focus on them as “breath” as well. In other words, you change your perception. You change the way the mind thinks of the breathing process and labels the different sensations going through the body.

In the classic Buddhist analysis, every sensation you have of a physical body sitting here has four facets. There’s the breath, there’s fire, there’s earth, there’s water. Breath is the energy, which may be moving or may be still. But even when it’s still, there’s a certain vibrational frequency to it. Fire, of course, corresponds to the feelings of warmth. Earth is feelings of solidity. And water is feelings of cohesion, feelings of coolness. Every point of sensation in your body has all four of these to a greater and lesser extent. They may seem like a foreign way of thinking about the body, but this way of thinking has its uses, particularly when you’re focusing on the breath. If you think of all the energy sensations in the body or the energy facet of every sensation of the body as being part of one large continuum—in other words, filling the whole body—and if you hold that perception in your mind, what happens?

One thing is that it makes it a lot easier to deal with feelings of heaviness or blockage in different parts the body. If you accept a blockage as being part of the solid and so can’t be changed, you’re stuck with it. But if you realize that it, too, has its breath side, you can do something with it. You can unblock it. As Ajaan Fuang once said, you can look for the breath sensations even in your bones. After all, bones are living material. They’re not rocks. They have an energy side to them as well. If you think of them in that way, think of the breath element in that way, you suddenly see where the blockages are caused by your old perceptions of where the breath could and couldn’t go. Once you simply hold on to the perception of allowing the breath to go in any direction, you find it can go in many different directions it didn’t before. And as the feeling of energy throughout the body gets more coordinated and everything feels like it’s working together, it’s a lot easier to settle down in the body, to fully inhabit your body, really to be here in the present moment.

So, even though the perception of whole body as breath may seem a little arbitrary, remember that all your perceptions are arbitrary. None of them fully encompass reality. What you want to do is focus on the sides that are really useful to think about, really useful to hold in the mind.

This is where mindfulness functions in concentration. You get a particular perception, you hold onto that perception, regardless. You may have doubts, “Well, gee, is this really breath or not, or is it just make believe?” But remember,

every perception, every concept, is crude. It's not a total representation of what you've got here. But what's the result of holding on to that perception? You find that holding onto the perception of whole body as breath has a lot of benefits. So you just hold on, keep that perception in mind, and then look at the body from that perspective.

This is why concentration is called a perception attainment. It's by holding on to certain perceptions that you get there and can stay there, because what you want are perceptions that bring you more fully into the present moment. At the same time, you want to have practice in being able to hold on to a particular perception, because as the concentration gets more and more solid, you'll be finding that you want to use other perceptions as well.

This is where the perceptions of what are usually called the three characteristics come in. The Buddha never calls them three characteristics. And the word characteristic, *lakkhana*, is never compounded in the suttas with, say, *anicca*, *dukkha*, or *anatta*. They're compounded with *saññā*, perception: the perception of inconstancy, the perception of stress, the perception of not-self. They're also compounded with another word, *anupassana*, usually translated as contemplation, but actually it means keeping track of a particular theme.

Once everything is settled down, you can switch your perception from breath to inconstancy. Look for the inconstancy wherever it might be in this range of your awareness. And you'll find it's all over the place, both in the body and in the mind. If you can simply hold on to that perception and see what it does, or you can simply think "stress," everything that arises is stress, everything that passes away is just stress: If you hold that perception in mind, what does that do to the mind? Again, the perceptions are meant to be used for their impact on the mind. We're not trying to come up with a total description of the true nature of reality. We're looking for useful perceptions that help the mind to gain a sense of dispassion, to stop fabricating stress and suffering all the time, to come more and more fully into the present moment.

There's one passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about how he gained insight into the present moment, seeing how many things arise and pass away at the same time. There's one type of causality, which occurs over time. And there's another, which is rising and passing away immediately in the present moment. Aging and death follow immediately on birth in your immediate level of experience right here in the present moment. Birth follows immediately on becoming and so on down through dependent co-arising. That's a synchronic level of causality. It's because the Buddha discovered synchronic causality that he realized that we're not a victim of past fate, our old karma, or some primary cause

or ground of being, or first mover. There are decisions that are being made freely in the present moment all the time that are having an impact in the present moment, too. If you learn how to get some control over them, you can put an end to suffering.

But the first thing is being able to perceive them, and to perceive them you really have to get into the present moment. And to get in the present moment, you have to learn how to use your perceptions in a way that bring you here. In some cases, it's simply a question of sitting down and focusing on the breath, and there you are. Other times, you find it's more difficult. You've got narratives that you're bringing in, narratives of what happened today, narratives of what happened a long time ago, narratives about what kind of person you are.

It's interesting to note how the Buddha handled narratives of this sort in his own practice. Look at the three watches of the night of his awakening. The first watch: You think you have narratives. The Buddha's narratives went back for eons and eons, encompassing all his previous lifetimes. But he realized that asking that question didn't lead to an end of suffering. So in the second watch of the night, he turned his mind to the passing away and re-arising of beings all over the cosmos, and he saw he wasn't the only one going through this process. Everybody was. But then he began to see a pattern: that your intentions, as governed by your views, determine whether you had a good rebirth or a bad one.

It was only then, in the third watch of the night, that he turned to the present moment. Did this pattern also happen in the present? And he saw that it did, and it could be used—by understanding of the pattern of intention and how it leads to craving and suffering, all based on ignorance—i.e., based on wrong views: It could be put to an end by having the right view that looks at things simply in terms of four noble truths.

So he started with his personal narratives, but then instead of going straight to the present moment, he stepped back and looked at everybody. He went from the personal to the universal, seeing that we all have our problematic narratives, stupid decisions we made in the past, things that we regret for a lifetime. And when you drop that lifetime and go on to something else, you usually forget everything and start all over again. We all come to the practice with an imperfect past, and seeing that can take a lot of the sting out of your past. Then, by the time you turn your attention to the present moment, it's with a lot more calm and understanding.

So if you find it easy to focus simply on the breath, go right ahead. If you find it difficult, if you've got issues that you're carrying with you, then stop and think in more universal terms. Because often when people with bad narratives come

straight into the present moment, the bad narratives follow them in here, and they can't get the mind to settle down. Then that becomes a part of the narrative of how incompetent they are, which is not helpful. If you realize we all come with problems, we all come with bad narratives, and there's no need to hold on to them, then it's easier to handle your difficulties with a lot more equanimity, a lot wiser perspective.

So this is how we come into the present moment: one, through our perceptions; and two, if we discover that we can't hold onto that perception because of a particular set of baggage we bring with us, we learn how to put it down by taking universal view for a while. Everybody suffers aging, everyone suffers illness, death, separation from those we love. So what do we have left? Our actions. Right here in the present moment is where our actions are being decided. So let's make the most of what we do have.

Use your perceptions as wise actions, skillful actions. Apply some of the Buddha's teachings, and see where they lead you. He never promised a full explanation of reality or a master narrative of what the cosmos is all about. But he did promise some useful tools for putting an end to suffering, for understanding suffering, and putting an end to it. It's simply up to us to see how well those tools can work.