

Tools of Perception

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Ajaan Chah once made the comment that when you study the Dhamma, you're gathering lots of concepts. When you practice, you learn how to let them go. But it's not the case that gathering the concepts is going to be useless. Concepts are useful tools. That's why the Buddha talked so much. But we have to use the tools in the right way. Otherwise, we just go around loaded down with a huge sack of tools, and it doesn't accomplish anything.

These tools are perceptions. The Pali word is *sañña*, which we translate in lots of ways. Thai, too, has several translations. One of them is *jam*, which means to remember, but it also means to fix something in your mind. In the dictionary of the Raja Pandit Sathan, which is like the Académie Française of Thailand, the definition of *jam* is *kamnot*: You fix something in the mind. You label it. You identify it, saying that this is this and that's that. That act of labeling has a huge power over your perception of reality. Whether it has an impact on the reality outside, the Buddha never sats. Reality outside of your experience is nothing that he wants to get involved with. He's more concerned with your experience and what these perceptions do to it.

We go around with a lot of perceptions that can weigh us down, that actually cause a lot of suffering. Then there are other perceptions that help alleviate the suffering. Then there's a point where the perceptions have done their work, and you put them aside. That's the correct use of all the different ideas and concepts we pick up from the study of the Dhamma.

The incorrect use of this is to say, "There's an ultimate view of reality and there are conventional views of reality, and what we're trying to do is to arrive at the ultimate view, which describes things as they really are." You latch on to those ideas of "This is ultimate reality," and you hold on to them, as if you could hold reality in words. Once you've held it in words, then what do you do with it? You're stuck with that view, those perceptions. You've taken the Buddha's concepts and you've used them for the wrong purpose.

The real purpose is to see: How can you identify the way you perceive things that's causing suffering, how can you replace those perceptions with more useful perceptions, and how can you use perceptions to ultimately get beyond perceptions altogether?

This process starts out on a basic level, as in the stories about the women crying for their children in the cemetery. In one case, the woman's daughter was named

was Jiva, which means to live. The Buddha said to her, “Do you realize that you’ve buried 84,000 daughters all named Jiva here in the cemetery?” That comment was enough to bring the woman to her senses. In other words, the perception that “this is my one and only daughter” was replaced by “this is one of 84,000.” Once you change the perception, it changes the way you look at the events and the way you react to the events, the amount of suffering that those events bring about.

On another occasion he said to another woman, “That son you’re crying for: Before he was born to you, where was he? Do you know where he came from? You don’t know. Where he’s gone off to, you don’t know either. He came as a total stranger. The next time you see him, he’ll be a total stranger again.”

In other words, the Buddha was helping her to change the perception of what had happened. Now, her original perception was true as far as it went: This was her only son in this lifetime. But the Buddha’s perception was also true. There are many different ways you can label reality. It’s not as if we’re trying to find the one ultimate way of labeling it. The important thing is that we ask: By focusing on which aspect of our experience are we causing suffering, and which aspect, when we focus on it, helps alleviate the suffering?

Like this sala here: You can think about all the effort went into building it, you can think of how it still leaves a lot to be desired, you can think about how it’s perfectly adequate for our needs, you can think about the fact that its foundations are based on a very movable piece of land and it can fall on us any time. There are lots of different aspects to the sala that you could be focusing on right now, all of which are true. Or you can decide simply that you’re not going to focus on the idea of sala at all. Focus on the body. It doesn’t really matter whether there’s a sala around it or not. You’ve just got the body that’s here, which is also a truth.

The Buddha talks about how a large part of meditation is moving from one perception to another. The example he gives is of leaving a populated village and going off into the wilderness. After a while, all the perceptions that go along with being part of the village start falling away, falling away, and they begin to seem strange. In the same way, when you leave the monastery, the issues in the monastery get further and further away. Or when you leave home and come to the monastery, the issues of home get further and further away, to the point where they become strange. You wonder, “Why would I ever get tied up in those issues?” Well, they were around you all the time, and you focused on them all the time, so they seemed natural. But when your surroundings are not so pressing and not so in-your-face, you begin to see the amount of stress that they involve.

What the Buddha's pointing out is that you can actually go back in the village after the mind is trained, and be in a village without carrying those perceptions around. You have the choice.

But in the beginning, we need to get away, get away from the events that spark those perceptions, and focus on what we've got right here. He went on to say that even the perception of wilderness causes disturbances to the mind. You might think about how far away you are from any help, the dangers you're exposed to, the discomforts you're exposed to, being in the wilderness. So, he says, drop that perception and then just focus on earth.

This is a way of getting people into concentration. You could focus on breath as your perception as well. Think of everything as breath energy of one kind or another, particularly here in the body, but the energy inside also connects with energy throughout the world. You can think about that as well. Because it's not only energy in the body, there's an energy pod around the body. It may be whole, or it may be ragged. Your energy pod may be opened in different places where you start pulling in the energy of other people, or it can be strong and resilient, resisting their energy. You might hold that perception of this energy all around.

Even the solid parts of your body are permeated by energy. The bones: Ajaan Fuang would talk about focusing on the breath energy in your bones, not just in your nerves and blood vessels, but even the most solid parts the body. There's a level of breath energy that you can experience there as well.

You might notice as you drop that perception of solidity and replace it with the perception of energy, a lot more things seem possible in terms of how the energy can flow, how you can breathe, and how the breath relates to the different levels of energy in the body. You see that, as you connect the different energy areas in the body, they can nourish one another, so that you have to put less and less energy into the normal activity of breathing in and out. This is how you get the mind into deeper and deeper concentration until the point where you really don't feel the need to breathe. The energy sources in the different parts of your body nourish everything else. The mind is still enough so that you don't need a lot of oxygen to nourish the brain. The oxygen you get through the pores is perfectly adequate.

In this way, your perception of what "breath" means begins to change. Your perception of the breath needs of the body begins to change as well. As you stay with the stillness of the breath, after a while the idea of holding in mind the perception of having a body sitting here: You begin to see that it places a certain amount of weight on the mind as well. So you drop it.

It gets replaced by the perception of space. You can think of the space that permeates between all the atoms of your body. Or if you're sensing the body simply as a mist, little sensation droplets, focus just on the space between the droplets. There's no boundary around the body, so things seem open in all directions. The space opens out in all directions—the space between the atoms in the sala, the space between the atoms in the ground, the space between the atoms in the trees and mountains all around us—and you can hold that perception in mind as well.

In each case, you see that the perception you're holding on to does create a certain amount of burdensomeness, a certain disturbance in the mind. When you can see that disturbance, you let go. The Buddha in one of his discourses talks about moving through the different levels of the formless jhanas by appreciating, on the one hand, the lack of disturbance that comes when you get to a more refined perception. Then as you stay long enough with that perception, you settle into it and indulge in it, as the Buddha says, just really hold on to it, learn to enjoy holding onto that perception, because these are cool perceptions. Space in all directions. Awareness in all directions. But after a while you see that even though they are pretty cool, they still cause a certain amount of burdensomeness, still a certain amount of disturbance to the mind. So you drop them and see what perceptions replace them, as they get more and more refined.

In this way, you're looking at things in terms of the aggregates, in particular, the aggregate of perception. The perception of form is gone, and what you're left with is feeling, perception, thought fabrication, and consciousness. But even these aggregates are not the ultimate terms. In the commentaries they talk about this being the ultimate description of reality: the five aggregates. But the Buddha advises us to go on to perceive whatever arises and passes away simply as stress arising and passing away, regardless of whether it's feeling or perception or fabrication or consciousness. So you drop even those perceptions at that point. Once they've done their work, you move on to seeing everything as stress arising, stress passing away. That's all.

The purpose of all this is to give rise to a sense of dispassion. You begin to perceive how much of your experience of the world is made up of these perceptions and the narratives, along with the thought constructs that they carry in their wake. And regardless of how true or accurate they may be, they also cause a lot of stress.

So it's not that you're moving from conventional reality to the ultimate description of reality. You're moving from a way of relating to things that causes stress, to a way of relating that doesn't cause stress. This is how you use these

perceptions. Then you let them go, step by step, as they've done their work. As Ajaan Lee says, when you finally get to the deathless, there is no right or wrong view in the deathless. Right or wrong view is an aspect of the path. When you get to the goal, you put both right and wrong aside. You pick them up as you need them in order to function in the world, but you see very clearly that that's why you're picking them up. And your picking up in this case is very different from clinging to and holding on.

So right view is a tool we can use. There are many different ways of describing reality, all of which are perfectly accurate. But then you ask yourself: accurate for what purpose? For what purpose are you describing reality? And to what extent does that particular description cause stress? To what extent is it actually useful for putting an end to stress? That's where the perceptions matter.

So we're not trying to get an ultimate description of reality, we're trying to get to the reality of the end to suffering: two very different things. The Buddha taught not to describe reality simply for its own sake. He talked about it, as he said, for the purpose of gaining release. This is why we have conversations. This is why he taught. And this is how we should learn to how use his teachings, so that we can know that release. When we know the release, we also know exactly how those tools have worked, so we can use them for whatever purpose we may still have, but we're never weighed down by them any more.