

Cutting Edge Perceptions

December 29, 2012

When you focus on the breath, it's important to take it one breath at a time. If the prospect of sitting here for a whole hour focusing on the breath weighs you down, remember it's only one breath at a time. This breath right here. This breath coming in; this breath going out. This helps keep you focused and doesn't weigh down the present moment with more than you can handle.

This principle applies in a lot of areas in the practice. When you're trying to keep the precepts and you're feeling very strongly tempted to break a precept, there'll be that voice in the mind that says, "You're going to give in a little way down the line, so why not just give in right now?" And you've got to say, "No. I'm responsible for right now. I'm not responsible for down the line. So for this breath, I'm not going to give in."

The same principle applies with dealing with pain. One of the worst things you can do is think about how long you've been in pain and how long you anticipate being in pain. Say you're 15 minutes into the meditation and already there's pain. And you realize, "I've got a whole 45 minutes left." Well, don't use the 45 minutes to weigh down this present moment. And don't use the 15 minutes to weigh it down. You've got just this breath right now and just got this experience of pain right here. That's it. It's not more than you can handle.

There are so many aspects of life that are like this, where you just give up, you say, "I can't take x any longer." That's because you're weighing down the present moment with all your memories about x : how bad it's been, how tired you are of it. You have to learn how to put those thoughts aside. Just notice, "What is the experience right here, right now?" And it's manageable.

Then if you feel that it's not manageable, look into it further. For example, with pain: When you've got this moment of pain, is it coming at you or is it going away? Almost always we have a subconscious sense that the pain is coming at us and we feel like we're being blasted with pain. We're on the receiving end. All it takes is a change in your perception to think that as soon as you see each moment of pain, you're seeing it going away, going away, going away. You're not in the line of fire. You're not receiving the pain. You're watching it go past, go past. And just that change in perception of the present moment is enough to keep you okay for the present moment. And just learn how to keep that perception in mind with each moment of pain.

This is the trick to endurance. You don't think about how much endurance you're developing and you don't think about how long you've been enduring or how much longer you have to endure. You just look at what you've got right here, right now, this very moment. And learn how to manage this very moment. Over time you'll find that the long stretches of time become manageable because you're not taking on long stretches of time.

So practice that with the breath. You're right here with this breathing sensation right here, right now. And the more careful attention you pay to it right here, right now, the more you're going to notice. For example, if you have any subconscious ideas that a comfortable breath or a good meditative breath has to be long and slow, you might ask yourself, "Is that what you need right now? What does the body need right now? What does the mind need right now? What is it willing to stay with right now?" Learn to be up on the news, rather than just dealing with thoughts you've brought into the meditation. Each moment is going to be its own moment, so stay right there with that moment. Try to be fully aware of it.

This is why we place emphasis on being centered but having a very broad awareness of the body at the same time, because that broad awareness helps keep you anchored in the present moment. If your awareness is small, it can dart back and forth, back to the past, up to the future, all over the place. Because it's small it can slip through all kinds of cracks. But when you expand the awareness of the present moment so you fill the body with your awareness and let the breath fill the body, it's hard for that expanded awareness to move around.

At the same time, you're more and more sensitive to what the body needs right now, what it's feeling in all its different parts, and how all those different feelings are related. And you can see the perceptions that may be tying together little patches of pain here, little patches of pain there, that weigh down the present moment.

One of the ajaans in Thailand has an image he likes to use a lot. He says to think as if you have a very sharp knife that just cuts through everything. You can apply that to all kinds of things. Any thought that's going to inch out into the future, you just cut it off. Any thought that inches out to the past, you cut it off. Anything in the present that connects any patterns of tension or pain in the body so that you feel like you've got whole bands of pain or whole bands of tension, just cut, cut, cut, cut, cut.

Get things down to the point where they're very momentary and very individual. Then you see that the present moment becomes a lot lighter. Your

sense of the body becomes a lot lighter. The sense that you're weighed down by things gets relieved.

So try to take things moment by moment, sensation by sensation, and have a sense that they are discrete moments, discrete sensations, so that they don't build up. In that way, you can relate more particularly to the present moment and see which sensations are being turned into problems by your different perceptions.

The role of perception is huge in the meditation. Concentration is a perception attainment. But the things that get in the way of the concentration can be perceptions as well, these mental fabrications that weigh you down, place obstacles in your way. Based on those perceptions you can actually create sensations in the body that become uncomfortable.

So the first thing to do when you notice that there's a sense of dis-ease in the body, a sense of heaviness or unpleasantness, is to ask yourself: To what extent is it the result of your perception? And the way to test for that, of course, is to try a perception that cuts things up like the knives. Or the perception that what you sense is just a little discrete moment of pain or a discrete moment of sensation, a discrete spot of sensation, and it's not coming at you, it's going past you, away from you.

See what other adjustments in your perceptions you can make that allow you to sit here with a sense of ease, a sense of being unburdened. You're not burdened by the fact that we're sitting here for a long period of time. You're not burdened by any of the potential painful sensations there are, because as soon as they go from potential to actual, you just cut them off. Cut off the perception that turns them into something solid and unpleasant and heavy. That way, you sit here with a sense of lightness, a sense of being unburdened.

So you cut things down to size. As you watch them as they're cut down to size, you begin to see the perceptions that you've been using to pull them together or to aim them at you. You see those as discrete mental moments as well and you realize, "Well, I can let that go, too. I don't have to hold onto that."

Ajaan Lee talks about a state of concentration in which anything that comes up immediately disappears. He says it's like the bubbles that form on a river when it's raining. The drop of water comes down from the sky, falls in the water, and there's a little bubble on the surface of the river, a little circle, and then it's gone... gone... gone... When you can allow that to happen.... and again, it's not so much that you have to create that sensation or create that image. It's just that there are other perceptions that have been getting in the way of realizing that this is the way things are: very discrete, very quick. But at the same time there can be a sense of

really solid centeredness in the mind, really solid settledness. You feel as if you really belong here.

That's when your perceptions are really helpful in creating a state of concentration that doesn't feel threatened by anything at all.