

# *The Perception of Space*

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When the Buddha taught breath meditation to Rahula, he started out with some preliminary meditations: reflections or perceptions to keep in mind as you get the mind in shape to be with the breath. These reflections and perceptions can be useful in all kinds of situations.

One of the perceptions he taught to Rahula was make your mind like space. Nothing can be written on space. This is an image that keeps reappearing throughout the Canon. When the Buddha is talking about developing goodwill for people who have spoken harshly or lied to you, he said, “Make your mind like space, make your *mettā*—your goodwill—like space.” Space, he says, doesn’t have a surface; nothing can be written on it. In other words, when people abuse you, you don’t take it and keep it; you don’t keep a record. You try to make your mind have that spacious quality, where nothing can be written on it.

There’s another passage where Ven. Moggallana is being tempted by some women, and he says that there’s nothing here that can be tempted. He was an arahant at that point and again, he said that his mind was like space—nobody can write anything on it.

This is a quality of mind that you want to develop from the very beginning and you can take it all the way through. It’s useful to think about this. We’re going to be having a large group of people coming in in a couple of days. And even though they’re going to be quiet, still the fact that there are lots of people, there are lots of opinions. Even when people are quiet, they can send all kinds of messages. Just the fact that their schedule is going to be different from ours can create some problems. So try to create as few problems as possible for yourself by making your mind the kind of mind that nobody can write anything on. Keep that perception of

space. Whatever they do, it's like writing on space. There's nothing there to write on, so you don't keep anything.

Our problem is that we tend to be like people who are engraving things in stone. Something happens we don't like, and it gets engraved in the mind as if it's never going to be washed away. Of course, that becomes a burden—the stone itself is a burden, and the engraving is a burden. So it's good to learn how to put those things down, to let them go, to have that mind like space. It's larger than anything that anybody can do. Keep that quality in mind, and you'll find that whatever happens in the course of the next few days, it just gets spaced out, you might say. There's space all around it, it moves through space, and then goes away. That way, there's no residue left.

This ability to let go of things without residue is an important part of the practice. You're sitting here meditating. If you're going to get *any* kind of concentration, you have to be able to let go of everything that comes up. Don't make a little mark that says, "I want to get back to that later." Just let it go, let it go.

The Buddha made a statement one time when he'd given up his wish to continue living. Ven. Ananda found out and pleaded with him, "Please reconsider." And the Buddha said that once he'd given something up, it was given up for good. There's no way, he said, that the Tathāgata can go back and pick up anything or take up anything again he'd let go.

It's because of that, that he was able to find true happiness. After all, the third noble truth is letting go, letting go without any strings attached, without any nostalgia for the things you let go.

This is a quality, again, that we want to develop from the very beginning. With generosity, when you give something, you let go. This was one of Ajaan Fuang's major pet peeves, when people would come and give things to him and then insist that he had to do this or do that with what they had given. As he said, if they didn't really give it, if they gave it with strings attached, then it's not really a gift. You have to

give it, and give it up, and that's it. If the person who receives what you gave doesn't do what you like with it, you're always free not to give something again in the future. But what you've given should be given. Otherwise, the tendency to hang on, to hold on just keeps going deeper and deeper. It gets harder to progress in the practice because there are lots of things that are harder to give up than just things.

So from the very beginning we should have the attitude that once you've given something up, you give it up for good. Ajaan Fuang taught me this lesson one time when I was dying a robe for him. A group of us had gotten together and decided he needed a good robe. So someone bought some really good cloth. We arranged for an old monk, an old Chinese monk, who had been a tailor before he retired and became a monk, to do the sewing.

Then it was up to me to dye it. And Ajaan Fuang said that he wanted it dyed the old way. He wouldn't tell me what the old way was; I had to find out. No chemical dyes, just the *kaen-khanun*, the heartwood of the jackfruit tree. It required a lot of boiling and boiling and boiling of the jackfruit tree, to get the concentrated essence. It took about two weeks to get the dye. Then I dyed the robe and it looked really nice. Ajaan Fuang wore it once, and then he gave it away—to a monk I didn't like.

That was a good lesson: let go. We've got to develop this quality of mind, because otherwise we hang on to little things, and little things pile up and pile up, and it's hard to find your way out.

So whatever comes up in the mind, if it's not part of the path, if it's opposed to the path, you've got to see it as something that's worth just sloughing off. That way, the path gets lighter. *You* get lighter as you walk on the path. And you can go through the world without things being written on your mind.

This contemplation of space is a useful perception to keep in mind. I don't know if I've told you the story of Yom Thaem.

She was an old woman who was one of Ajaan Fuang's students. She came to meditation late in life. One night she was meditating, and a voice came to her as she was meditating and said, "You're going to die tonight." She so figured, "Well, if I'm going to die, I should die meditating." So she sat there and she said that she had the feeling that her body was like a house on fire. She tried to focus here, and couldn't stay here; tried to focus there, and couldn't stay there. There was no place in the body at all where she could find any comfortable focus.

Then, she said, she thought of space—the space around the body; the space permeating through the body. So she focused totally on the perception of space and let go of every other perception concerning the body. She stayed there for quite a while. Then she realized that she hadn't died. She came back to the body and everything had returned to normal. As she said, she learned a good lesson that night—when there's no place you can stay in the body, there's always space.

So even though you haven't reached the level of infinitude of space in your meditation, still it's a useful perception to hold in mind when you need it. After all, it's one that the Buddha taught to Rahula from the very beginning, even before Rahula started doing breath meditation: Make your mind like space. Make space the context in which everything else is happening, in the body, in the mind, in the social world around you. Think of it all happening in space. That makes things a lot lighter.

This perception of space is not the goal, but it's a useful perception to master as you work toward the goal. It helps take a lot of heavy issues and makes them a lot lighter.