

Perception

August 15, 2016

One of the lessons you learn from practicing concentration is how powerful your perceptions can be.

The way you perceive the breath has a huge impact on what it feels like to breathe and on your ability to settle down with the breath. If you feel that you have to fight for your breath, and that there's only a little channel by which the breath can come in and out of the body, it's going to be hard to be aware of the breath in the whole body. It's going to be hard to spread your awareness around with a sense of ease and well-being, with a sense that everything is connected.

But if you perceive the breath as energy, and the energy as flowing through the entire nervous system, that makes it easier to be with the breath and to adjust the breath in the different parts of the body. This perception gives you a really useful tool for getting the mind to settle down with the sense of centered but broad awareness that the Buddha identifies as right concentration.

The word “perception” here, *sañña*, means perceiving something *as* something. This is one of the disadvantages of the word in English: On the one hand we can say you have your range of perception, meaning your ability to just pick up data from all around through your senses. But it can also mean—and this is what the Buddha means by *sañña*—your ability to perceive something *as* something. You have a symbol, a word, a picture, a sign, a label for what's going on and how to interpret what you experience in life.

Without these labels, we couldn't function. We could experience things, but we wouldn't be able to handle them properly. We wouldn't be able to get around in the world. Our first perceptions are around the issue of what's food and what's not food. That's an important perception. It helps prevent us from trying to eat things that would be bad for us. As we grow up, we extend our repertoire of perceptions into languages. Every word in a language is a perception, a label you put on something. On top of that, we have our mental images, the pictures we have in mind that we apply to things around us.

Now, perception does play a role in dependent co-arising, which means that if you do it with ignorance, it's going to cause suffering. If you learn how to do it with knowledge, you can avoid suffering. You can actually use perception as part of the path, as when you're getting the mind into right concentration.

But you want to look carefully at how you do this and how you use your perceptions as you go through life. Some people say, “Perceptions are arbitrary.

When you put your perceptions together to figure things out, you're creating a map, and every map distorts things." Well, some maps distort more than other maps. Some maps are useful for some purposes, and some maps are useful all around.

I was talking to someone in New York this spring who was saying, "There's no one right description of reality, and that means there's no one right interpretation of the Dhamma, because every interpretation is a map, and all maps distort."

Well, think about the map on the door of a hotel room to tell you where the fire escape is. It may distort the building but it gives you precisely the information you need. The fact that it's uncluttered makes it all the more useful. And that's what the Dhamma is. It's a map, a map to release. It contains all the essential features of the path to release and it cuts away unessential information. If those fire escape maps had all the architectural details of the building and told you what color the hallway was and what color all the rooms were, and filled you in with all the details about the hotel, they'd be useless as maps. When a fire comes, you want something that gives you just enough information to get to safety. And that's what the Dhamma does.

The problem is: To what extent do your maps of what you're doing while you're here really correspond to the Buddha's map? And to what extent are other issues or other agendas getting in the way? The question that Ajaan Lee recommends that you ask when you're dealing with sensory restraint—"Who's doing the looking? Who's doing the listening?"—also applies here: Who's doing the labelling? Because these signs and images we have in mind are there to serve a purpose. They point forward to something, but they also point back to your original motivation. What's the desire behind them? Usually, they serve our sense of becoming. The world that we're perceiving around us and our sense of who we are in that world is based on a desire, but it's built out of perceptions. And the desire warps the perceptions in its direction.

So even though no perception is a totally accurate representation of what's out there, the question is: What purpose do they serve? And do they serve a good purpose? As you go through life, you want to notice how your perceptions are actually causing trouble for you—and what ways you can replace them with better perceptions.

The Buddha lists four specific ways in which we tend to really skew our perceptions: seeing constancy in things that are inconstant; seeing pleasure in things that are stressful; seeing self in things that are not-self; and seeing beauty in things that are not beautiful at all.

Now, the reason we do this is because we have desires around those things that

we want to perceive as beautiful or constant or whatever. But then as you follow those perceptions, where do they lead you? Do they produce the happiness you want? Or do they actually get in the way? Because some perceptions may be relatively accurate for one purpose, but total distortions for the purpose of freeing the mind.

So you've got to check. When you perceive things in this way, where do those perceptions lead you? And who are you listening to when you listen to the voice that says, "Well, this must be *that*, and *that* must be this; or this is beautiful; or this is me, this is mine; this is good, this is bad." Okay, good or bad for what purpose? Me or mine for what purpose? I mean, there *is* a sense of self that you need on the path: the self that wants to find freedom, the self that wants to have enough self-confidence that you can actually take on the path. But there are a lot of other selves in your stable of selves that are really useless.

Similarly with the world: There are lots of worlds out there that we can get involved with. But that's just it: All too often, once we get involved, they don't let us out. The Dhamma, on the other hand, is a world—the state of concentration is a world—that actually has an exit. It's the hallway to the exit to freedom.

So as you get more sensitive to how the mind labels things—and you can see this more clearly the more still the mind is—try to apply that sensitivity to the way you perceive things around you, the way you perceive the people around you, the way you perceive the situations around you, realizing that you do have choices in how you apply your perceptions and that the perceptions have implications. They're connected to certain desires and they lead to certain ends.

You may be holding on to an old set of perceptions that might have been useful for something you wanted when you were younger, but it's now getting in the way of finding a deeper happiness, a truer happiness. Because the happiness that's promised by the Buddha is something that actually lies beyond perception.

We use the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self, of seeing what is ugly in what we tend to view as beautiful, i.e., the human body, so that we can loosen up our attachments to a lot of our old unskillful perceptions. Then we let those more skillful perceptions fall away as well. But don't drop them until they've done their work.

So if you're having a problem with lust, learn how to look at your own body as unattractive; look at the bodies of the other people around you as unattractive. Apply that perception.

When you find yourself identifying with unskillful ways of behavior, teach yourself some new skills and then identify yourself around those new skills: the skills of being a meditator, the skills of being someone who's generous, someone

who's patient, someone who's wise. We have these choices.

The part of the mind that keeps saying, "Well, this is the way I am and this is the way I have been all along, so you're just going to have to put up with the way I am": That's the voice that's keeping you off the path.

You can learn some new skills and develop a new identity around those skills. Just don't let your old perceptions get in the way.