

Dethinking Thinking

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There were some beavers raised in captivity. Their parents had been killed, and they were very young when they were taken by the wildlife rescue people. As they got older and became adults, it came time to release them back into the wilderness. And the rescuers were concerned: Would they know how to build a dam? Would they know how to build a lodge? So they released them into a stream, and sure enough, very quickly, the first thing they thought about was building a dam, then a lodge. It was instinctive.

In the same way, our minds are very instinctive about creating states of becoming. We create little worlds, and then we take on an identity in those worlds. As the worlds fall apart or our identity falls apart, we create new ones. We keep at it. This is how the mind occupies itself, how it uses its imagination to figure out what to do.

But it's also why we suffer, because all those becomings are based on craving. As the Buddha said, wherever there's craving that leads to becoming, there's going to be suffering. So the purpose of the meditation is to learn how to unlearn that habit.

This is why when the Buddha gives us instructions for concentration—which are actually in the description of right mindfulness, which tell how you *do* the concentration—there are two activities. One is to stay focused on one thing in and of itself, and the other is put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. This is going to require you to put aside *all* references to the world while you're sitting here. You want to be just awareness, breath, and that's going to be becoming enough.

And sure enough, the mind will start creating little becomings, just like those beavers building dams, but you want to nip them in the bud. You have to see: What is it that goes into those becomings?

The Buddha said that two of the aggregates are especially active in shaping the mind or shaping these becomings: feelings and perceptions. And you want to learn how to deconstruct them.

This is a really important part of the meditation. A world begins to form in the mind and you have to destroy it. Now, doing that is engaging in craving for non-becoming, but you're going to find the right balance between craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming only by learning how to engage in both skillfully. For instance, your craving for becoming right is now aimed at creating

a state of concentration. Your craving for non-becoming has to be focused on doing away with everything that would lead to new concepts of the worlds – perceptions of the worlds. Any perception of the mind right now that tells you where you are in the world, who you are in the world: See if you can shred it. Turn it inside out.

Dogen has a word for this. He calls it “de-thinking thinking.” And here you’re engaged in de-perception.

The Thais have interesting insight into perception. Their word for perception, *sañña*, is also used for agreement or contract. When a perception forms in the mind, there’s an agreement in the mind that this is going to mean that, and that’s going to mean this. So you you’ve got to learn how to undo the agreement. An image forms and you learn how not to recognize it. Something that would normally key you into another world, you say “Nope, I don’t recognize that.”

You could think of the breath breathing right through it. One of the Thai ajaans liked to use the image of a knife. A perception forms and you slash it. Another one forms, you slash it. Anything where any connection comes up, you slash right through it with a knife.

You do that because you’re changing your frame of reference. You need to change your frame of reference if you’re going to see what’s going on in the mind. If you allow your frame of reference to be the world, there are certain things that make sense in terms of the world, certain values, and they’re not the values you want right now. If you adopt the world as your context, if you adopt that frame, the ways of the world make sense. But here you want to make them *not* make sense right now. Look at them with new eyes.

That’s why we stay with the breath in and of itself, the body in and of itself. Try to keep a low profile, fly under the radar. Don’t let clouds of abstractions build up, because they do turn into becomings. So stay close to the sensation of the breath.

You’ll realize, of course, that perceptions play a role in concentration, too—in keeping you with the breath in and of itself. How you perceive the breath will have a huge impact on how you experience it. In other words, the way you label it, the pictures you have in your mind about the breath, will have a huge impact on how the breath actually flows. So you want to experiment, to make sure that this alternative frame is interesting. Engaging. A very pleasurable place to be.

So you try out different perceptions of the breath. You can try Ajaan Lee’s, the perceptions he recommends in Method Two. Or you can try the perceptions he recommends in some of his Dhamma talks. He’s got a wide range of perceptions to suggest. He talks about breath sensations that go up, breath sensations that go

down, those that spin in place, those that go back and forth. See if these perceptions help. You could think of the breath coming in the soles of the feet and going up through the spine. Or you can think of it starting at the base of the skull and going down the spine. One perception I've found helpful is of not having to drag the breath through the body. Tell yourself that as soon as you start breathing in, the breath has already gone throughout the whole body, throughout the whole nervous system—it's that fast. That subtle. Just hold that perception in mind and see what happens.

The point here is that we're not trying to get after the most objective perception of the breath. Because it turns out there are lots of different valid ways you can perceive it. The objectivity we're looking for is the objectivity of cause and effect. In other words, you try this perception, you get those results. You try another perception, you get different results. Which is better? Because a lot of insight, as I've been saying many times, is a value judgement as to what's worth doing. So which perceptions are worth doing?

If you run into a perception that's not worth doing, you shred it. You de-perceive it. Question it; turn it inside out. And you can test this most effectively when you don't get into the framework of the world. As soon as you start thinking about the world, there are the duties that have to be done out there, things you have to worry about, things that are important in the context of the world. But right now we're trying to establish a different type of importance, where the duties of the world would only interfere.

So if the mind wanders back to the world, try to shred those perceptions. Work on the perceptions that help you stay grounded here in the breath in and of itself, making this your framework. That's when you get to see perceptions in and of themselves, feelings in and of themselves, simply as they're directly experienced. Simply as you engage in them.

When we say that we experience these things, we experience them through doing them. It's not that we're simply on the receiving end.

The Buddha's analysis of the aggregates, remember that? "For the sake of feeling-ness, for the sake of perception-hood, you fabricate a feeling, you fabricate a perception." In other words, there's a raw material there from your past kamma, and you turn it into actual feelings, actual perceptions, for the sake of having feelings and perceptions you can use. There's an intentional element there, so learn how to use that intentional element well, to experiment.

This, again, is not to get to the objectivity of the best perception of the breath, or the truest perception of the breath, but to the objectivity of cause and effect.

This perception has that effect, that perception has this effect: That's what you want to see.

After a while, as you get the mind into concentration, you'll be dealing with perceptions in every level up through the dimension of nothingness as a perception attainment. So you have to know perceptions well.

And they're useful not only for concentration, they're also useful for discernment. Look at what the ajaans say about their practice. When you're working with pain, the big issue is perception. When you're working with lust or pride around the body and trying to see the unattractiveness of the body, the issue is the perception. Why is it that you can go from perceiving the body as unattractive to back to being attractive very quickly? Who hijacked the perceptions?

So of all the aggregates, perception seems to be the most central one in the teachings of the forest ajaans. And you can make it central in your own practice by learning how to play with it, as the mind is very much shaped by the labels it applies to things. Be very careful about which perceptions you can ride with as you try to stay focused on the breath in and of itself—and which perceptions you have to de-perceive, to take apart. To turn inside out.

This is something you learn through trial and error, through experimenting to the point where you get to trial and success. You gain your range of perceptions that help the mind to settle down, that help you gain insight, and you've mastered the skills of taking apart any perceptions that are unhelpful or actually get in the way. That's when you really can start counteracting that tendency to keep building dams and lodges, to create little worlds and then go travelling in them, willy-nilly. You learn how to create a world here around the breath, and inhabit this world for the time being, while you learn how to take apart everything else.

So as we de-perceive, we're deconstructing—and decontextualizing as well. As I said, certain values make sense in the context of the world, but when you see them simply as mental events in and of themselves, they don't make sense anymore. When you see that, you begin to see the way by which you can get yourself free from them.