

The Six Properties

February 9, 2021

When the Buddha talked about tranquility and insight, he talked about them as mental qualities that you bring to the meditation, and the meditation develops them further. You start out by bringing them both to the practice of concentration. Tranquility is basically an answer to the questions, “How do I get the mind to settle down? How do I get it to stay?” Insight answers the questions, “How do we view fabrications? How do we see things in terms of fabrication, and then what do we do with them?” If you look at the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation, he combines the two. You’re sensitive to bodily fabrication, the way you breathe; you’re sensitive to mental fabrication, your perceptions and your feelings; and in both cases you calm them down. Seeing things in terms of fabrication is a matter of insight; calming fabrications is a matter of tranquility.

With the breath, you can get it so calm that it actually feels like it’s stopping—not that you suppress it or squeeze it to stop, simply that you allow the sense of the breath to flow throughout the body to the point where it feels full of breath energy. The body seems to *be* breath. Everything’s saturated. It’s simply a matter of energy coming into energy, and the energy, you realize, starts in the body. When the air comes into the nose, it’s because of the signals come from the body. It’s not the air forcing its way in. It’s the energy in the body that creates the space allowing the air to come in. When you shift your perception in that way, the breath grows a lot calmer, the mind grows a lot calmer as well. When you have that sense of fullness, it’s a very calming sense, sense of feeling sufficient right here. You don’t feel any need to breathe.

In this way, you’re developing tranquility and insight at the same time.

One of Ajaan Fuang’s students came to him one time—this was after she’d been meditating with him a couple of years—and said, “I’m just beginning to realize that this is not just a tranquility technique that you’re teaching us here.” He said, “Of course it’s not.” Then, after she left, he turned to me and said, “See how she can look down on the Buddha’s teachings?” Because when the Buddha taught meditation, he didn’t say, “Go do insight,” he said, “Go do jhana.” And in the course of doing jhana, sometimes the emphasis will be on the settling down, and sometimes the emphasis will be on understanding what you’re doing in terms of fabrication—and particularly, how you can get it to be more and more calm, what’s getting in the way. As you come to understand what’s getting in the way, you’re going to understand the process of perception.

The forest ajaans make the point that you don't have to try to understand all five aggregates, all at once. You find one that really seems to be the key to everything else, and you focus there. And often the key aggregate, as they explain it, is perception.

So as we're working with the breath, we're going to perceive the breath in different ways. As I said, first there's just the energy flowing through the body, then you perceive the breath as originating in the body, then you allow it to spread smoothly. You think of that sense of radiating energy from any of the resting spots that Ajaan Lee talked about—the tip of the nose, the palate, the middle of the head, the tip of the sternum, right above the navel, wherever you feel that the breath energy is radiating from—and you focus your attention there. As for any sensations in the body that seem to be getting in the way of the flow of that energy, allow them to relax, dissolve away, until you feel like the breath is flowing everywhere.

As I think I've told you, when Ajaan Fuang was teaching people, he found that in the very beginning stages people would have all kinds of problems, sometimes problems he'd never had, never encountered. But he would apply the seven steps in Method 2. He told me that wherever there's a problem, one of the steps is missing. In the beginning stages, some people were coming from the west, so he'd have to tell them to go east; some people were coming from the east, so he told them to go west. But eventually, if they stuck with him, they'd get to that point where it seems like the breath is still. You're not breathing in, not breathing out. From there he'd have them work with the elements, and from that point on, the concentration was the same for everyone.

What he'd done, of course, by getting them to work with the breath, was getting them to work with the wind element, getting the breath all worked out to the point where you have the sense of still breath energy filling the body. Then the next step would be to get all the elements in balance. You'd start out by emphasizing them one by one, and the first one would be fire.

Ask yourself, where in the body is the warmest spot right now? You don't have to wait for the breath to stop to do this. You can get some benefit from it even in the beginning stages of the meditation, but it's going to be most effective and most impressive when the breath is very still. But you ask yourself, where is the warmest spot in the body? Focus your attention there, and then as you did with the breath, think of that warmth spreading from that spot. Don't let go of that perception. After all, the Buddha said concentration is a perception attainment. It's this ability to stick with one perception for long periods of time that's really

going to come in handy. With the perception of fire, see how warm you can make the body.

Then if you decide you've had enough warmth, it's getting a bit too warm, you think of water. Your body's full of liquids of various kinds, and they should all be cooling. So where's the coolest spot in the body right now? Focus on that, and then think of that coolness radiating through the body. Hold that perception in mind. Don't let it waver. The image they give in the forest tradition, one that Ajaan Fuang used quite a lot, was of a red ant. In Thailand they have these large red ants that live in the mango trees. Apparently, they feed off the sap of the mangos, and they're very possessive. Anybody who climbs in the tree to get a mango, they're going to attack. And their bite hurts. If you try to pull them off as they're biting you, they hold on so tenaciously that their heads will snap off even as they're still biting. Ajaan Fuang would say, "Try to have that kind of tenacity as you stay focused."

After water, he'd have you focus on earth. Where are the solid parts of the body? You could think of the bones, or just of a feeling of solidity down in the lower part of your torso. This is really useful for times when you're feeling dizzy. Think of everything in the body being as solid as possible. And again, hold that perception in mind. Don't pay any attention to anything that would tell you that the perception is not right.

You're seeing the power of your present actions. There will be different possible sensations in your range of awareness. What you're doing here is being very selective. You've got this one perception in mind and you look for any sensation that corresponds to it, and you hold on. You see the power of this selected focus.

Then, after he'd emphasized or exaggerated the different elements, the different properties, he would have you bring them together, just right: not too cold, not too hot, not too heavy, not too light. Think of a balance between the water and the fire, and a balance between the breath and the solidity, the earth. Hold that perception of balance in mind.

From there, you go to space. This is where you see the virtue of learning how to hold on to one perception. You realize, as you feel the space around the body, that you could focus on the body, but here you're going to totally ignore any perceptions or sensations of the body. You're going to focus on whatever feels like space. When you do that, things begin to connect up. It's as if space permeates the body. I would hold in mind the perception of atoms, which are largely space, and just stay with that perception.

From there, Ajaan Fuang would recommend going on to consciousness: What's aware of the space? And again, focus just on that perception of "aware, aware," or "knowing, knowing, knowing." If you'd stayed there long enough, he might tell you, "Now let go of the oneness of that knowing." And you'd find that the perception that follows on that is extremely light, as if there were nothing there.

What you're doing is that eighth step in the breath meditation—calming mental fabrication—as you get perceptions that are more and more calm. The perception of earth is more calm than the other elements, balance is calmer than earth, space is calmer than balance, knowing is calmer than space, that sense of just nothing is calmer even than the sense of being aware.

Now, this requires strong focus. The dubious mind will say, "Well, aren't there other possible perceptions here?" And there are. As when you've moved from a perception of the body to the perception of space: You realize that you could go back and create a body out of your sensations, but you're choosing not to. What you're doing is seeing the power of perception, how the images you choose to hold in mind really do have an impact on shaping your mind, and shaping your experience of what's going inside you and around you.

So again it's an exercise in tranquility and an exercise in insight. And as I was saying the other day, you can do the tranquility, you can ask the questions about fabrication, but the insights you gain are things you don't *do*. They come about as a result of what you do.

As the Buddha said, you bring tranquility and insight *to* the meditation and then they get developed *by* the meditation, and it's all the same meditation. It's doing right concentration, starting with right mindfulness and then, as mindfulness gets established, it turns into right concentration. It's all one practice.

So work with your perceptions so that they're continuous and you have the sense as you're tuning into different levels of your experience, different levels of reality here, the same way that you tune into different stations on a radio. The stations are there, it's simply that you've got to get your tuning apparatus right, and get it so it's steady. You don't want the kind of radio that jumps around, or pulls in different stations all at once. Once you've tuned into one station, stay there.

As your perceptions get steadier, that helps you see their power, and the implications that that lesson has are things you discover for yourself. You can't tell yourself ahead of time what those implications will be, or where those insights will show up in your life as you go through the day.

But if you're trying to maintain your perception of the breath, maintain whatever perception of the element that you're going to focus on, you're getting the conditions right.

Ajaan Fuang had one student who ran a store with her husband who was able to keep the perception of space going throughout the day. It's that kind of tenacity that will turn up insights in places where you don't expect them, and those insights are the best kind. The insights you expect are not for sure. But the lessons you didn't foresee, and that lead to an unforeseen release: Those are the ones that you know are genuine insight.