

Perceptions for Training the Mind

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In the Buddha's analysis of the causes of suffering and stress, fabrication comes right after ignorance, the message being that if you fabricate in ignorance, you're going to suffer. But if you fabricate with knowledge, it becomes the path—and that's what we're doing as we sit here and meditate. We're learning how to fabricate with knowledge.

We reflect on the Buddha's teachings, many of which are there to give us ideas of knowledgeable ways of fabricating. There's bodily fabrication, which is the breath. And there's verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation—the way you talk to yourself. You bring up a topic in your mind and then you comment on it and ask questions about it, pass judgment on it. Then mental fabrication is feeling and perception. In the suttas, the Buddha gives lots of examples for how to fabricate these things skillfully.

He tells us how to breathe—those sixteen steps of breath meditation. He tells us how to think about things: what sort of things are worth directing our thoughts to, and how to evaluate them. Lots of the suttas engage in that kind of discussion. As for the feelings, he talks about how to create feelings of pleasure and rapture through the breath. The perceptions come in the analogies that he gives, pictures you can hold in mind that can talk to your lizard brain, so that you can bring some knowledge and awareness even to the really, really basic mental functions that are going on right now.

We try to bring this knowledge to our meditation. As the Buddha said, the various levels of right concentration, all the way up through the dimension of nothingness, are perception-attainments. We use perceptions to stay with our object. But remember that when the Buddha's describing how you get into right concentration, in his description of right mindfulness, there are basically two activities. One is staying focused on one topic. That's where you use the perception as a marker to stay with that topic, to hold it in mind, and to get some ideas of what you can do with it.

Then there's the other activity, which is putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world—in other words, dealing with all the distractions that would pull you away from your topic. He provides perceptions for dealing with those, too. It's good to remember that we have this body of knowledge, this body of perceptions that we can draw on. We use the Buddha's—sometimes we can

work variations on his themes—but he gives us the basic ideas, starting with how to conceive of the breath.

The breath, he says, is part of the internal wind element. That tells you something right there. It's not the external wind element that we're focusing on. It's the internal—in other words, breath in its aspect as proprioception: breath as you feel it in the body. We're not focusing on the passage of air through the nose or on the upper lip. We're focusing on the internal wind element as you feel it inside, going down deep into the different organs of the body: down the spine, through the intestines, through the stomach, through the chest, through the heart, in the head, in your arms and your legs. You want to hold that image in mind. You can think of different ways that the breath goes through different channels through the body.

The one caveat here is that you'll begin to notice, or some people will begin to notice as they're focusing on the breath in the body, that it doesn't seem like the breath energy ends at the skin. There seems to be an energy cocoon around the body as well. You feel it from inside. It's not something that touches the skin, but you feel it as it connects with the energy inside the body.

That's often a useful perception to hold in mind, because sometimes the breath energy's not flowing well in the body, and you can cure it as you work from the energy in the cocoon. Make sure that the energy in the cocoon flows smoothly, feels light, open, balanced. Then, from there, work back into the body.

That's the one exception, or what's one aspect of internal breath energy, which, as I said, doesn't end with the earth element at the skin. It surrounds it a little bit. But otherwise, we're working with the breath, the body as it's felt from within, and using that perception of breath to get the breath to be pleasant.

Then, as the Buddha said, you allow that pleasant feeling to flow through the body. This is where he provides a perception. Think of a bathman kneading water through a ball of bath powder. You work the pleasure, along with the breath, through the various blockages in the body so that everything flows smoothly until you get to that second image: the lake with the spring, and the water flowing up from the spring without having to make any effort at all. Those are useful perceptions to hold in mind as you're working with the energy.

Those are some perceptions that allow you to work with the breath to the point where the breath gets still. In the meantime, though, you also have to work with perceptions to help keep distractions at bay, as you're putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

The Buddha gives you five different ways of dealing with distractions, and each of them has a perception that goes along with it, an analogy.

The first one: When you realize you've slipped off the breath to something else, you realize that it's a grosser thought. Being with the breath is more refined. So, just as a carpenter would drive out a large peg with a smaller peg, you simply replace the distracting thought with thoughts of the breath. This perception, or this method, is for times when you had a simple lapse in mindfulness. You blank out for a minute and suddenly find yourself in another thought. So you have to remind yourself: You don't have to tie up the loose ends of the thought. Just leave the loose ends dangling and get back to the breath.

There are other times, though, when the mind really does want to think about that distracting thought. The thought has some allure, so you try to think about it in ways that destroy the allure. The image the Buddha gives is a young man or a young woman, fond of ornament, looking in a mirror and seeing the carcass of a dead snake or a dead dog around his or her neck. In other words, you focus on the drawbacks. This can be something as simple as observing that this thought, whatever it is, is dealing with something that's inconstant, stressful, not-self. If it's about sensuality, you can think about the drawbacks of focusing on the body, or whatever the sensual object is, and how foolish your obsession with sensual thoughts is.

The Buddha has lots of analogies for the position you put yourself in when you're trying to find happiness through sensuality. You're like a dog chewing on a chain of bones stripped of meat, with nothing but the taste of its own saliva to nourish it. You're like a hawk with a piece of meat, and other hawks want to get that meat. They'll tear you apart if you don't let go. You're like a person going around with borrowed goods, showing off beautiful borrowed things. But when the owners see you, they'll take them away. Here again, the Buddha gives you some analogies, some perceptions to hold in mind to see the drawbacks of sensual thinking.

He has similar analogies for dealing with the drawbacks of angry thoughts. You're going to do something foolish under the power of your anger, and you're going to please your enemy. Do you want that? That kind of thing.

If that doesn't work, the next method is simply to ignore the thought. Here the Buddha's image is: You see something that you don't want to look at, so you turn your eyes away, you close your eyes. In other words, the thinking is going to go on, but you're not going to get involved. You're not going to pay attention to it. Here you can use your own images, your own perceptions. I like the one of a stray dog coming to beg for food. You know if you give food to the dog, it's going to follow you home, and you don't need any more dogs. So you pretend like it's not there.

You find that you can do this even in the midst of noisy places, in the midst of disturbances, in the midst of a mind that's chattering away. You can still stay focused on the breath. The chatter doesn't destroy the breath. The noise outside doesn't destroy the breath. It's still there. It's simply a matter of what the Buddha calls *anupassana*, following the thread of something, maintaining your focus on something even in the midst of other things.

This is a good analogy for the whole practice. We live in an imperfect world, but we're trying to develop the perfections. So you can't demand that everything be quiet before you settle down. You're trying to settle down in the midst of outside noise and inside noise, realizing that the act of attention is what feeds your distracting thoughts. So if you don't pay them any attention, after a while they go away. They may do and say some crazy things first to grab your attention. But again, you're just firm in your determination not to go there.

The fourth method, the fourth set of analogies or perceptions, is when you realize that every time there's a distracting thought, there's going to be a little knot of tension someplace in the body that acts as the marker of the thought. As soon as the thought comes in, there'll be a little glitch of tension someplace. If you're sensitive to the breath, you can figure out where that is, and you can breathe right through it. The Buddha's analogy is of a person walking and saying, "Why am I walking? Why don't I stand?" When they're standing, "Why am I standing? Why don't I sit down?" Then: "Why am I sitting? Why don't I lie down?" You go to a more and more relaxed position.

If none of these perceptions work, none of these methods work, then the final one is the sledge hammer. He says that just as two strong men would beat down a weaker man, you beat down your mind. You grit your teeth, place the tongue against the roof of your mouth, and just tell yourself, "I will not think that thought." If you want, you can repeat a meditation word, "buddho, buddho," rapid-fire, really fast. Of the various methods, this is the one that involves the least in terms of discernment, the most in terms of willpower, but at least it can clear the air. After a while, you can pull out from that and use one of the other methods. Get back to the breath.

So the Buddha's providing a whole repertoire of perceptions, both to help you stay focused on the topic of your meditation—to give you a clear idea of where you're focused, what you're focused on—and also for dealing with anything that would grab you and pull you back into the world.

Try to bring some knowledge to the way you perceive things. That will have a huge impact on how you shape the state of your mind. It's one more way in which the Buddha gives you tools to develop the mind in right concentration as a way of

engaging in the process of fabrication with knowledge to get you on the path, to develop the path. When you're doing that, you're acting in line with the duties of the four noble truths. And, as the Buddha said, when you stay on the path, you're safe. It's when you wander away from the path that you get into danger.

Here again, he gives an image: people with a cart, and they decide to leave the main road and take the cart off into a side track into the forest. It turns out the side track is nowhere near as smooth as the main road. Ultimately, the axle gets broken, the wheels get broken, and they're stuck.

You don't want to be stuck. You want to be on the main road. Even though there are difficulties in staying on the main road, still it's smooth and it's safe. It's where you want to be.