

Perceptions & Potentials

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Relax the muscles around your eyes. Think of the breath coming in right there at the eyes. If there's any tension in that area, let it relax. A lot of our thinking uses these muscles in particular, so one good way of cutting out a lot of thinking at the beginning of the meditation is to breathe through the eyes and the muscles around the eyes.

You're doing two things at once: You're focusing on the sensation of the breath energy in the eyes and you're holding a picture in mind: in this case, the picture of the breath energy going around the eyes.

As the Buddha said, every state of concentration up through the dimension of nothingness is a *perception attainment*. That picture you hold in mind—that's your perception at the center of your concentration. As you get to know the breath, you begin to notice how much your perception of the breath has an impact on how you actually *feel* the breathing—and also, the impact it has on opening up parts of the body that had been starved of the breath.

On the other hand, if the perceptions are unskillful, they can create blockages. So, you want to see what kinds of perceptions are most conducive to developing a sense of well-being in the body.

When we talk about the breath, it's not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. The sense of where you feel the air coming in and out through the nose is a tactile sensation. But when the Buddha talks about the in-and-out breath, he lists it as a part of the wind element, which is something in the body already. It's not a tactile sensation. It's part of what we call *proprioception*—your sense of the body as you feel it from within.

So, hold that perception in mind and see what it does. When you think in these terms, you realize that the breath isn't something you pull in from the outside. It actually comes from within the body itself. And you notice, as you breathe in, breathe out, that waves of energy start at different parts of the body.

Ajaan Lee lists what he calls the *resting spots of the breath*. These are some of the spots where you may sense that the breath starts: the tip of the nose; the middle of the forehead; the middle of the head—when he says *middle* of the head, think of drawing a line from left to right, front to back, and right there, where the lines intersect, that's the middle of the head; the palette; the base of the throat; the tip of the breastbone, or a point just above the navel. Those are some spots you can try.

You'll notice that many of these conform to the chakras described in yoga. So, if you have knowledge of other chakras, you can try those as well. Let your attention settle there at one of the beginning spots, and then think of it radiating out from that spot at the same time that the breath radiates out.

If there's any sense of blockage as the energy begins to flow, think of that blockage dissolving away. If it's a tense muscle, relax it. Here again, you may have to adjust your perception of the body—your picture of the body—as to how these energies can flow. You want to create a sense of well-being that can flow through the body, to make the mind willing to stay here, to give it a sense of belonging here, of being at home here.

The Buddha compares concentration to a home, a dwelling for the mind; he compares it to good food for the mind, medicine for the mind. Ajaan Lee makes a further comparison: He says that when the mind has this inner sense of virtue, it's well clothed. So, you've got all the requisites: food, clothing, shelter, medicine for the mind. You're going to need all this support because there are going to be difficulties in the path. It's not going to be an easy path all the way along.

A lot of people would like to have it that way. They say, "After all, we're going to the ultimate ease, we're going to a sense of peace, so the path should be an easeful, peaceful path." But it's not the case that pleasant things are always found through pleasure. In fact, the true happiness of the path is often found through difficulty. It's not total difficulty, which is why we have this alternative here—this place where we can rest the mind.

But just be prepared for the fact that there will be difficulties on the path because you're going to be seeing things about yourself—as you look into the mind—that you don't like. After all, what is wisdom and discernment? It's seeing your own stupidity—areas where you've been foolish.

You have to be in a good mood to be willing to see those things. So, let the breath put you in the right mood. Let your perceptions of the breath put you in the right mood.

Remember the task of mindfulness: It's not simply watching things coming and going on their own, because they *don't* come and go on their own. Your mind is actively shaping your experience out of the raw material that comes from your past karma. Sometimes the raw material is good; sometimes it's not so good. But if you can develop skill in the present moment, you can make good things of whatever is coming in.

It's like a good carpenter who can make something good out of scraps as well as good pieces of wood. Or a cook who can make good food out of whatever is in the kitchen, good or bad. You begin to gain a sense of the different potentials that

are coming in from the past because the present moment is not coming at you ready-made. The raw materials come in, and you have to do something about them. And to shape them well, you have to learn how to look for the right potentials.

When the Buddha talks about the different elements in the body, the Pali word, *dhātu*, can also mean potential. So you're looking for what you can do with the potential of the breath to make it a good place to stay.

We're often told that the cause of suffering is wanting things to be different from what they are, but what they are is something you're already making. The whole point of the path is that you can take your sense of the form of the body, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, and you can turn them into something else. They don't have to be a weight on the mind. They can be a path. You're making something different out of them.

Now, the suffering comes from wanting the potentials to be something they can't be, but how are you going to know what they can or can't be unless you experiment? So experiment with different kinds of breathing, different ways of perceiving the breath energy in the body, and you'll notice that you do have a role in shaping your present moment experience. So shape it well.

As the mind settles down, you find that you may have to change your perceptions. I noticed that when Ajaan Fuang was teaching people breath meditation he'd have different ways of describing the breath. He'd ask them to describe how *they* felt it. Sometimes it would feel one way as you were settling in, and then as the mind got really still, and you didn't have to do so much thinking and adjusting, the breath would feel different. You'd feel more encompassed by the breath.

When you're starting out, it's as if you're in one part of the body watching the breath in another part. But as you begin to settle in more and more, it's as if you go *into* the breath, and you're surrounded by it. That'll be a different perception: You're bathed in the breath as it comes in, as it goes out.

And you can keep changing your perceptions. Instead of focusing on one spot inside the body where the breath comes from, think of every cell in the body as being a center of breath energy coming in, going out, expanding, contracting. It's as if you're giving equal weight to every part of the body and you're alert to every part of the body.

The breath will grow very calm. It may even come to the point where it seems to stop, but it doesn't stop with any sense that you have to start breathing again—as long as your perceptions are right.

Remind yourself that the breath is full in the body. If the body needs to breathe, it'll breathe. If it doesn't need to breathe, why force it? We force it because of our fears, because of our habits, but when you can change the perception and hold onto these new perceptions, you begin to realize, "Okay, this is something different."

The body can get very still. Just stay there. Learn how to be one with the stillness. The mind will be still; the body will be still.

Don't pay attention to any vagrant thoughts that are nibbling away at the edges. When you don't pay them attention, it's as if you're not feeding them. They're stray dogs, stray cats, and if you don't feed them, they'll go away.

The sense of concentration will get stronger. The breath will be really still, but as I said, it's still with a sense of *fullness*. There's no sense of deprivation. So, if you adjust your perceptions properly, they can help get the mind really, really still—with a strong sense of belonging here.

Work on developing this foundation. Ajaan Fuang had a student one time who, after meditating with him two or three years, came one day and said, "It was about two or three years ago today that I came and started meditating with you, and it just seems so long." Ajaan Fuang told her, "Don't think in those terms. Think about right now. You're building a foundation, and ultimately you're going to put a very tall building on top of it. If you're in too great of a hurry to get the foundation done so that you can start building the building, the building's going to fall down. The foundation has to be strong. The stronger the foundation, the taller the building you can build."

So work on settling down right here. All too many people ask, "Now that I've done concentration, when do I start doing insight?" Well, part of the concentration involves, in and of itself, developing some insight into perception. Perception is one of the fabrications of the mind. Insight means gaining understanding of how fabrications work. The insight is not so much trying to see things as they *are*, but seeing things as they *function*.

So, you're seeing the function of perceptions. You're seeing the function of feelings. You're seeing how the mind puts these things together. All of that is insight.

We're using the insight to get the mind to settle down, so the two go together. Ideally, as the Buddha says, you want them working in tandem—insight and tranquility. So, even without thinking about *insight*, you're gaining some understanding.

The same with tranquility: Even without thinking about *jhāna*, you're getting the mind into *jhāna*. The object of *jhāna* is not the idea of *jhāna*, the object is the

breath. The jhāna comes from learning how to relate to the breath in ways that make it more refreshing, more still, more refined.

I was once teaching a vipassanā teacher who wanted to learn a little bit about concentration, but he said, “Don’t try to get me into jhāna, okay?” And I said, “Sure, I’m not going to force you.” So we didn’t even talk about jhāna, but he found that his mind fell into the stages that Ajaan Lee describes without even intending to.

There’s a natural progression, and it starts by learning how to relate to this issue of the breath and perceptions, and how they relate to each other: how you can adjust the perceptions to improve the breathing, how you can adjust the breathing to call into question some of your old perceptions.

If you really take an interest in this issue—breath and perception—you find that it has lots of ramifications. You gain tranquility and insight without even having to think about them.