Alternative Conceptions

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When you look at the breath, there’s not just the sensation of the breathing. You find that there’s also your perception of the breath, the mental image you have of it. And it’s not the case that you have the pure sensation and then you add the mental image on top of it. Sometimes the mental image will determine what you sense. So you want to learn to take advantage of that fact. There are different ways of perceiving the breath, different ways of conceiving the breath. Some are helpful, some are not. Some make the breath really comfortable, others make it difficult. Some of them relate to the way you conceive your whole relationship to the body. Many of us tend to think that the basic sensation of the body is of the solid parts, and then you have to pull the breath into the solid parts, like a bellows. Once you have that conception, then you breathe in a way that actually confirms the conception. There’s a sense of pulling in, pushing out. There are not too many openings whereby you can pull it in and push it out. So that way of conceiving of the body and the breath actually adds tension to the process. You might want to try other ways of conceiving it that reduce that tension. Think of your primary sensation of the body as breath energy. It’s because of the breath that you sense the solid parts of. The energy is the primary sensation, and the solidification is something that happens later. Which means that there’s breath already all over the body. You don’t have to pull it in, you don’t have to push it out. There’s no squeezing, there’s no pressure, there’s no pumping that’s really needed. Then this energy connects to every pore of the skin. So you can think of the energy coming in and out of the body from all directions. It’s just waiting there on the skin, waiting there at the skin to come in. It’s simply a question of allowing it in, relaxing the little muscles all over your skin, enough so that the breath can come in and go out with no problem. Think of the breath sneaking in behind you. Coming from all directions. When you can think of it that way, it changes your whole relationship to the process. And the process actually changes. There’s a greater sense of fullness, ease, refreshment in the breath. You don’t have to pull in, you don’t have to push out. Playing with your perceptions and sway is a very important part of the practice. It’s not just a game. On the one hand, it makes it easier to stay in the present. There’s a greater sense of comfort and ease as you sit here. But secondly, you also see the power of perception, how much simply changing an image in your mind changes your physical experience. And that’s an important insight. It gets you down to the basic level. It’s where insight happens, what the Buddha calls name and form, together with consciousness. Form, of course, is the form of the body, how it feels from the inside as we’re sitting right here, the sense of warmth, which is the fire element, the solidity, which is the earth element, the liquidity, the water element, and the flow of energy, which is the wind or the breath element. That’s form. As for name, you’ve got feelings and perceptions, contact, intention, and attention. Those are the raw materials for gaining insight. Reducing everything in your experience just to those terms helps you to see the connections and see the way you fabricate things in such a way that leads to suffering and in such a way that doesn’t. That’s the basic value of all these teachings. Some people think that meditation is aimed at stripping away all of our preconceived notions, all of our conditionings, and getting down to the pure sensory experience. No, sensory experience is never pure. It’s never devoid of mental preconceptions. When you look at dependent co-arising, you’ve got ignorance and fabrication, name, form, consciousness, and then the six senses. Already prior to basic sensory experience, you’ve got a lot of stuff going on. And so it’s more a matter of seeing things not in terms of some pristine experience that’s freed from our conditioning, that yet is somehow still in the realm of conditioning, i.e., in terms of the world of the senses. The only place you’re going to get really pure experience is outside of the realm of the senses, where the realm of the senses ceases. So what you do with conditioned experience is you learn how to shape it in such a way that leads to that outside. What ways of perceiving are helpful in that direction? What kinds of intentions are helpful in that direction? This path that we’re following, as the Buddha said, is a kind of karma, the karma that puts an end to karma. So it’s a kind of intention. And then there’s attention, the way you look at things. You could look at things in terms of yourself, or you can look at things in terms of the four noble truths, which basically reduces things to activities. Then once you raise those questions in mind, what are the activities here? How do our perceptions act? How do our feelings act? Instead of turning these things into a sense of self, you look at them simply as activities and seeing where they lead. That way you get a sense of how you should shape your perceptions and how you should shape your feelings that are helpful. In terms of this path that we’re trying to follow. For example, with feelings, we talked today about how there’s a tendency when there’s stress in different parts of the body to connect all the little spots of stress and tension and make a big web of tension throughout the body. One pain connects to another pain and it makes things really miserable. Sometimes you can barely breathe with all these bands of tension running around your body. And we noted how it’s like playing connect-the-dots. It’s kind of a malicious connect-the-dots. And it’s not just drawing one straight line from one dot to the next. I once heard of a novice in Thailand who was a very good artist, and the game that he liked to play was he would have somebody put three dots on a piece of paper, anywhere on the piece of paper, and then he would draw a drawing of that person connecting the dots. So it was more than just straight lines. It was a whole picture. And that’s the way we tend to do it in our own minds. We take a little piece of tension here, a little pain there, and we make all kinds of faces out of those bands of tension. That’s using feeling and your perception of feeling in an unskillful way. It doesn’t help with the practice at all. What you want to do is learn how to connect the spots where it’s comfortable, where there is a sense of ease, where there is a sense of fullness. And there are those spots in the body. As the Buddha said, if you pay appropriate attention to them, they turn into rapture. So if there are these bands of tension in the body, or if pain seems to have taken over a part of the body, try to look for the openings in those bands of tension, or those openings in that solid block of pain. It’s not one solid thing, and these are not solid bands of tension. They’re actually little dots of sensation, which you have drawn together. Erase the lines that you’ve drawn together. Take instead of this a sense of ease, a sense of energy, that just wants to flow in and be full. Oozing around those bands of tension, so that you’ve got a different kind of connection. You’ve got the connection of all these full and easy spots. So that overwhelms everything else in the body. Then just apply just the right amount of perception and awareness to maintain that. And you find that it’s useful. One, it really does create a sense of ease here. Secondly, you’ve learned a lot about perception. You’ve learned about how feelings and perceptions can be turned into part of the path. They’re not just a given. You’ve fabricated them. You’ve taken the raw material that comes in from past actions and turned it into something that’s useful or not, something that’s skillful or not. So learn to imagine other ways of connecting things. Learn to imagine other possibilities. We don’t often think of imagination as part of the path. We mainly connect with the creation of other worlds that pull us away from the present moment. But here you’ll use your imagination in the present. Think of different ways of fashioning the present, different ways of fashioning your feelings, your perceptions. So you can create the ease and well-being of right concentration. And then the concentration then becomes a good basis for insight. Not simply because it makes the mind still enough so you can see, but in the process of creating the concentration, you’ve learned a lot about how the mind puts things together. This is why the Buddha, when teaching meditation, simply said, “Go do jhana.” He didn’t say, “Go do vipassana” or “Go do samatha.” Because both the tranquility and the insight are implicit in the practice of really understanding how to create this sense of ease and well-being in the mind. So the potentials for right concentration are already there in the feelings, in the possibilities for perception. Simply learning how to put them together in the right way. All the ingredients you need are here. It’s simply learning how to be a good cook. Both in the creation of the sense of ease and then in the maintenance, just keeping it going, you learn an awful lot about the mind. Just simply remember, every time you’re faced with a different situation, remember, you’ve got choices. Some of the choices lead to suffering, some of the choices lead to the end of suffering. It’s up to you. You want to have the imagination to realize there are other choices. Think of Prince Siddhartha. When he wanted to leave home, his friends all said, “Oh, it’s impossible. This idea of happiness is not based on conditions. Nobody’s ever found it in the past. All the great people of the past have contended themselves with what you can find in the world. They couldn’t imagine what he was talking about. Maybe they were even threatened by the idea. In other words, if an unconditioned happiness were possible, but they weren’t working toward it, they felt threatened. So they tried to block the possibility out of their minds. As a result, they never found anything. It was more than they could imagine. It was more than normal, ordinary pleasures you see all around. But because Prince Siddhartha had the imagination to say,”This could be possible. Let’s give it a try,” that’s what enabled him to find the way out, to find that unconditioned happiness. So always allow room in your imagination for that. And when things get tough in the practice, allow some room in your imagination to think, “Well, maybe there are some choices here that I haven’t realized. Maybe I’m not stuck at a dead end. Maybe there’s just some other way of doing things.” It’s like that riddle they pose. Suppose you’re dreaming. You find yourself in a ship with different members of your family—your parents, your children. You’ve got too many people in the ship, and you know that if all of you stay in the ship, you’re all going to die. Somebody has got to go. Who would you choose? What would you do? And he’s found that if you pose it to adults, they stop and think for long periods of time, and it’s really an anguished decision. If you pose it to children, they’ll say immediately, “Wake up! Get out of the dream!” So there are more choices than you might think. You’re sitting here with a body. There may be pains, but there are different ways that you could deal with them more than you might think. So allow some room in your imagination for new ways of perception, new ways of attending to the pain—i.e., the questions you ask about the pain—and new intentions you might have toward the pain. Our basic intention is to get rid of it. The Buddhism says it’s a pain. The wise thing to do with the pain is try to comprehend it. That’s a different alternative entirely. Always remember, there may be more choices than you might think, even in something as basic as this. So always leave room in your imagination for that possibility. you

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