The Power of Perception

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When you concentrate on the breath, you’re trying to hold one perception in mind, just the label “breath.” Think for a minute about what the breath can be. It can be the feel of the air coming in and out through the nose. It can be the feeling of energy coursing through your body. It’s all part of what they call the wind element in Bali. The wind can be still, the wind can move in the same way the breath can be still. The breath can move. The difference between simply breathing and focusing on the breath lies in this perception, your ability to maintain the perception of breath without dropping it. It’ll be that label on the back of the mind. When the breath is coming in, when the breath is going out, there’s still breath, breath, breath. It may be very subtle, so subtle you can hardly sense it, but it’s there. A lot of the trick in meditation is learning how to maintain this perception of breath without dropping it. That’s the way your meditation begins to take on power, the power to change your mind. Normally, the mind is fragmented with all sorts of perceptions, ideas, intentions, and they can affect the mind for good or bad. The problem in many cases is that it’s all pretty random. We stick with one perception for a while and then drop it to move off to something else and something else. It’s like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it falls on this end, sometimes it falls on that end, sometimes it falls splat in the middle, without any real pattern. When our minds have no real pattern, then our lives have no pattern as well. Wandering around from one concern to the next, giving into what’s most pressing as opposed to what may be most important. This is why it’s good to come out to a place like this, where the pressures of your daily life are far away. Of course, you may be carrying some of them here with you, but you can use the power of perception to hold them at bay. There’s a sutra where the Buddha makes a comparison like this. He says it’s like a monk going out into the wilderness and simply holding on first to that perception of wilderness. You’re out in the wild. The security of home and of a wall between you and the elements, and you and the animals, is gone. But there’s also a large space between you and all the pressures of being at home, the people you normally deal with, the issues that come with those people. If you can hold that perception, that perception of wilderness in mind, those other pressures of family and home and society, get farther and farther away. You begin to see them in the proper proportion, that they’re really not all that important. They seem important because they’re screaming in your ears, but when you get farther away from them, the sound of their screams and yells gets weaker and weaker. The Buddha gives that as an illustration of the power of perception, that you can empty your mind of a lot of disturbance simply by changing your perception. In the beginning, you do go to a place that’s like wilderness, just to get away, so your mind can gain some confidence in its power to hold on to a perception and keep other concerns at bay. The real trick is to be able to carry that wilderness of mind back into your daily life. That’s where we practice working with the breath. Take that same issue of perception and simply apply it to the breath, so that when you go back into your daily life, you’ve still got the breath right there. The breath can be your connection to something separate, something that stands back a little bit from the rush of daily concerns, and can see them in perspective. When people go on retreat, they often talk about trying to take retreat mind back into the world. This is how you do it, by practicing why you’re in seclusion, why you’re in a quieter place, to hold on to a perception in spite of the disturbances that come from outside and the bigger disturbances that come from within. A place like this helps you to see things in perspective, that there are other things a lot more important than the things that are most pressing, most demanding. When you learn how to hold on to the perception of breath, why you’re here, why you’re here, in a place of relatively few disturbances, few disruptions, few distractions, then you’ve got a foundation for carrying that skill back into other places where there are more disruptions and distractions. This is where the Buddha calls concentration “perception attainment.” It’s the perception that lies at the heart of what we’re doing. You’re maintaining the perception of breath all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, and then learning how to augment that perception. Because a perception on its own can’t withstand the force of a lot of things coming in through the eyes and the ears and the nose and the tongue and the body. But if you augment the perception with a comfortable perception of breath, that gives it strength, it gives it staying power. So it’s the actual sensation of the breath, allowed to be comfortable, combined with the perception. And then the associations you build up around that perception, that the breath can be your friend, the breath can be soothing, the breath can be comfortable, the breath can permeate every pore of your body, can bathe every cell. When you have those associations with the breath, then it’s really nice to carry it around. Because you know you can tap into it anytime you want, anytime you need it. So, while you’re here, work on the skill of maintaining that perception. Be alert. Be mindful. And stick with it. Those three qualities that are required for establishing a frame of reference, for establishing mindfulness. Those are the ones that are going to give it staying power. So we’re here to practice. We’re here to train. The other day I read about someone saying, “Buddhism is an ongoing conversation about the meaning of human life.” But you notice there’s not much conversation going on here. There’s conversation going on in your mind. But it’s good to question when people say things like that. Because, for one thing, the whole idea of Buddhism is a Western idea. Over in Asia, they talk about the Buddha’s way, the Buddha’s teachings, the Buddha’s message. What is the essence of the message? It’s not in the words, it’s in the training. The way to train the mind. So we’re here to train with all that that entails. You’re working at a skill. You find that you’re going to fall off the breath. Well, you pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back on the breath again. We’re not here to converse about the meaning of life. In fact, I don’t think the Buddha ever mentioned the word “meaning of life.” He did talk, though, about how to understand suffering so you can put an end to it. Then he offered a training. That’s what we’re doing. It’s a training. And essential to that training is our ability to learn how to stick with a perception of breath. Keep that label of breath. Keep the breath going comfortably in all kinds of situations. It’s the skill in doing this. That’s how you carry the retreat or the retreat. You carry the seclusion back into an unsecluded world. It’s something very subtle. But as you strengthen it, you find that the power of your perceptions really does make a difference in your life. It really can alleviate suffering. That’s what the Buddha said. That’s what all of his noble disciples have said. And the only way you can know if it’s right is to put it into practice. See what results you get. Actually submit to the training and see what changes it makes in your life.

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