Where is Here

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Meditation instructions often start out by saying, “Focus your attention right here.” Well, where is here? Or, to put it another way, what are the different things you have here? What are your choices for which here you’re going to focus on? I remember hearing a Vipassana teacher years back talking about how she had quite a sense of power as a teacher. She started a retreat talking about suffering. The retreatants would generally have a pretty miserable retreat. If she talked about joy and lightness, they’d have a nice retreat. I must admit, I felt a little creepy hearing about how much she enjoyed the power she had over people’s minds. But what it does show, in general, is the power of perception over what you experience. There are lots of things you could be experiencing right here, right now. Concentration is an exercise in learning how to use that power of perception over what you’re experiencing right here, right now, to the best advantage. Focus on the breath. You find there are many levels of breath in the body. There’s the in and out breath. There’s a sense of energy that moves more gradually throughout the whole body. There’s a sense of energy that moves instantaneously throughout the body. There’s still energy. There’s moving energy. They all occupy this space right here. The Buddha talks about how you find a place for your mind. It’s not just a question of physical place, i.e., you could focus on your nose or you could focus on your chest. But there’s a mental place as well. You start with a certain perception, and it’s going to highlight certain things in your awareness—in your awareness of the body, in your awareness of the mind. I don’t know if you’ve ever noticed this, but if you’ve ever looked at a stainless steel kitchen counter, you look at the reflection of a light on the counter, and you see these little scratches in the counter. And those scratch marks will seem to form a halo around the light, regardless of where it is. You move a foot over to the side, and the reflection you see there will also have scratch marks as a little halo around it. What’s happening is that the light will pick up whichever scratch marks or whichever parts of scratch marks surround the spot. It’s not that the scratch marks are actually designed in concentric circles around that spot, but the reflection of the light will pick up whatever’s there and create a circle around it. It’s the same with your powers of perception. If you hold a perception in mind consistently enough, and then look for whatever in your experience corresponds to that perception, you find that it’s everywhere. This is why they talk about the elements of the body being in every atom. In other words, there is breath everywhere in your body. There’s solidity. There’s liquidity. There’s warmth. There’s space. The question is, how consistently are you going to hold onto the perception? After all, the Buddha said, “Concentration is a perception attainment.” You hold onto the perception of breath, and just stick with it until you can see everything in the body as an aspect of breath. Even the parts that normally seem solid, you can begin to see, “Well, this is a type of breath energy.” To learn how to look at your body that way, close your eyes, whatever you sense in the body is breath of one kind or another. Then see which kinds of breath energy are unnecessarily blocked. Work through the blockages. Even though your old perception may have said, “Well, that’s actually a bone or something solid that you can’t really work through.” But if you say, “No, there’s breath in there, so let’s see what we can do with the breath in that part of the body to unravel some of these blockages.” The more they get unraveled, the easier it is to stay in the body up to a point. You’re never going to have perfect breathing. In fact, the quest for a perfect breath sometimes distracts you. John Fung’s analogy is of a large water jar. You have these around the houses in Thailand, especially out in the countryside. It collects water off the roof. It’s a huge thing, sometimes as big as a person. You pour water into the jar, and there comes a point where the jar is brimming full. Now, you could continue pouring water into the jar, but it’s not going to get any more full than that. It’s the same with the breath. You work through the different blockages, tight spots in the breath energy, up to a point, to the point where it feels really good to stay in the body and that’s as good as it’s going to get. If you try to improve on that, the mind gets distracted. You’re defeating the whole purpose of the concentration, which is to gain a sense of having a comfortable place to stay here in the body where the mind can settle down and be still. If it’s good enough to be still, it’s good enough. Now, you may find as you stay there with “good enough” for a while, you begin to sense other ways that you could make it better. Learn from that as well. In other words, it’s good to have the Buddha’s general map for concentration in mind, but you also have to learn how to explore, “Well, how do I experience my body?” As I get more and more sensitive, what opens up as I stay with things longer and longer? In other words, you develop your own sense of how to settle in and how far you can go to push things at any one point. When to rest, when to push again. But it’s important that you understand this principle of the power of perception. You can perceive the body as a block of iron, making it very difficult to breathe. Although if the breath is still, sometimes it feels nice to have everything really solid. You can perceive the body as just totally liquid blood flowing through every part of the body, all the time, all the time, all the time. It’s just blood flowing around in the body. Where is the blood blocked? Where is the circulation tight? Which parts of the body are being starved of blood? You can look at that. The same with warmth. You find some parts of the body are warmer than others. Does the warmth feel balanced, or is it heavier in one part than in another? If the heaviness is uncomfortable, does it feel good? If the warmth feels good, how do you spread that warmth into other parts of the body? Again, it’s largely through the power of perception. The potential for warmth is everywhere. Just as the potential for liquid feelings is everywhere. What feels balanced right now? John Fuhen would have his students, once they’d gotten to the point where the breath was still throughout the body, think about the other elements in the order of fire, water, earth, and then balance them out. Balance the breath with the earth so you didn’t feel too lightheaded or too heavy. Balance the fire with the water so you weren’t too hot or too cold. Then develop a sense of “just right.” Then you familiarize yourself with that sense of “just right” so you can go there more and more quickly. The stages become a lot faster. Then you think, “Space.” Space is here, too. Remember, all that space between the mind and the body. All that space between the molecules. All that space between the atoms. All that space in the atoms. It’s all there. If you can hold that perception of space steadily enough, you can have that sense of space permeating the body and going out in all directions, permeating the walls of the sala, permeating the earth beneath us. As far out as you can sense, as far out as you can imagine, it’s all space. It’s the perception that tunes you in to these different elements. You’re here, but you’re just paying attention to different things here. So it’s a different here. Your experience of what’s here is different. This is how you learn the process of becoming. Perception plays a huge role in your sense of the world right here and right now. You want to learn that because you’re going to have to learn how to understand the process of perception so ultimately you can go beyond it. But you can’t go beyond it without playing with it. Just as we read about the arahants, they have no here, no there. You can’t simply clone their insight. The way to get to neither here nor there is to play with it. It’s to understand right here as thoroughly as possible. How does the mind create a right here? What different right heres can you experience? Where does the difference come from? You can’t let go of anything until you thoroughly understand it. How form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, and consciousness all get combined to create a right here, and how they can be combined in different ways to create different experiences right here. What kinds of experiences have relatively less stress than others? If there’s an imbalance in the body, how can you create a balance? By taking advantage of what you’ve learned about perception. There are lots of interesting things to explore here. Exploring sensitizes you more and more and more to the things that ultimately you’re going to have to let go. How many times I’ve heard Zen people say, “You don’t want to think about the processes of meditation. Just go straight for awakening. Go straight for the unconditioned.” As the Buddha says, you touch the unconditioned with the body. You touch the unconditioned right here, right now. That’s a potential that’s also accessible from right here, right now. But you’re not going to go straight there by ignoring what’s happening right here, right now. You’ve got to understand it. You’ve got to play with it. That’s how you understand it, how you learn about it. It’s only when you’ve explored these possibilities that you can fully let them go, to learn how the mind creates different worlds right here, simply in terms of the potentials of the elements, of the different levels of the breath, whatever seems most congenial for you, whatever seems to get the best results. Use that as your key to unlock right here, right now. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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