Some Space Around Your Perceptions

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Take some deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. Allow your attention to settle there. It can be anywhere in the body. It doesn’t have to be the air coming in and out of the lungs. In fact, it’s good to understand the breath more as an energy flow. Now you feel different parts of the body. When you hold onto the breath in that way, then when the in-and-out breathing gets more calm, you still have something to focus on. You also find that you can work with the breath energy in the body, too. If it’s tense or tight in some part of the body, think of it relaxing. If it feels blocked, think of the blockage dissolving away so that energy can flow freely all over the body and all through the body. Then breathe in whatever way feels most comfortable. That perception of the breath energy flowing through the body is an important part of the meditation. What is it that the mind uses to focus on the breath? It has to have a marker of some kind. It might be the word “breath,” or it might be an image that you hold in the mind of the breathing. There are various images you can use. The image of the breath energy going through all the blood vessels, all the nerves, out to every pore. That’s a useful image to hold in mind. It allows the breath to be more subtle. And then for you to think of the comforting energy of the breath or the energizing energy of the breath, whichever you need, flowing throughout the whole body. It’s not just air coming in and out of the lungs. The whole body can benefit from the breathing. Think of it right. And as you work with the breath in this way, you begin to see the power of your perceptions, i.e., the images you hold in mind. Because that becomes the marker by which you remember to stay here. And when you remember to stay here, the quality of the breathing is going to change. Now, you want to use this to reflect on other times when perception has an impact on your experience of the world as well. As the Buddha said, perception is one of the things that fashions your mind state. And different people with different perceptions can feel the same things, but they feel something different. If someone’s holding you down, and if you perceive them as holding you down, and they’re holding you down with bad intentions, okay, it really hurts. If they’re holding you down with good intentions, i.e., they’re giving you a really good massage, your perception of the pain is going to be very different. And where you’ve come from is going to have a big impact as well. If you come from a really cold place, you feel something that’s 50 degrees, and it’s going to feel warm. If you touch something in the summer here when it’s over 100 outside, okay, 50 degrees is going to feel very cool. You want to keep these facts in mind, because there are many times when your perceptions get in the way of seeing things in a way that’s really useful, really skillful. And many times those perceptions are buried deep in the mind. You look into dependent core arising, the Buddha’s description of the different stages by which we create unnecessary suffering. And perceptions are buried really deep down, right next to your intentions, right next to your attention. In other words, the perceptions you hold in mind are going to influence your intentions, what you want to do about things. They’re also going to tell you what to pay attention to. And this can really screw you up if you’re paying attention to the wrong things. And then the types of intentions you have and the way you pay attention, that’s going to have an impact back on your perceptions. The perceptions are not written in stone. Your worldview and the way you try to fit things into your worldview can change, but sometimes it’s really resistant. You’ve got a worldview and a way of looking at things, a way of looking at other people, that serve certain purposes, and you’re afraid to let it go. So you try to get at these perceptions sideways. In other words, learning the lessons you can from how you can use perceptions to affect the way you relate to the breath. And as you begin to see that there are some benefits that come from changing the perceptions, maybe that idea will seep into other areas of your life as well. But mindfulness has to be involved. This is one of the reasons why it’s so important to understand mindfulness, not as just being aware. It’s holding something in mind. And again, concentration practice gives us a lot of practice on that. You’ve got to hold in mind the perception of the breath so you can stay with the breath, and your mind can actually settle down. Then you’ve learned the lessons about how perceptions can change your experience of things. If you change your perceptions for the better, things get better inside. How about things outside? The way you deal with other people, the way you relate to situations around you. There are a lot of perception constructs that we carry around that are good defense mechanisms. At least, we think they’re good defense mechanisms, but often they can backfire. So you have to be careful. Just step away from your perceptions and keep that in mind, that not every perception, even though it’s been reaffirmed many, many times, or seems to have been reaffirmed many times, is actually true. Because it’s so easy when we test our ideas to be biased in one way or another. So these lessons that we learn from meditation, don’t just keep them here on the meditation cushion. Bring them into your life. And if you find that you engage in perceptions that mess things up, and you find that they’re very quick, you have to remind yourself to slow down. Before you say anything, before you do anything, ask yourself, “Have I thought this through? Am I really sure that this is right?” Have at least one breath in there. That’s to remind you of the lessons that you’ve learned while sitting here with your breathing meditation. You can calm things down with perceptions, or you can stir things up with perceptions, depending on the image you hold in mind, your understanding of how things fit together. And it’s good to be able to step back. What discernment is all about? It starts with the discernment that comes with restraint. You know, you’ve been acting in certain ways and speaking in certain ways and thinking in certain ways that haven’t been helpful. So just keep reminding yourself to step back, breathe a bit, ask yourself if maybe the situation might be the other way around. John Lee’s test, or one of his tests for any insight you gain in the meditation, is, “What if the opposite is true? Or to what extent is the opposite true?” So you tend to hold perceptions that get in the way of acting skillfully. Ask yourself, “These perceptions I hold on to, maybe I’ve put a lot of faith in them, they’ve been serving certain purposes, but maybe they’re actually getting in the way of other things. Maybe their opposite might actually be helpful sometimes.” So think of what the opposite of that perception would be. Anything to sort of loosen up your holding on to your old perceptions. Now, you will find that part of the mind feels threatened. But you have to learn how to question that, too. Is this perception of threat really valid anymore? It’s easier to ask these questions while you’re sitting here quietly, but you want to be able to learn the thick of things as well. Because usually when things get thick, your knee-jerk reactions come in. So learn how to create a little space, even in thick situations. Have a breath. Have a moment of questioning. Do I really want to act on this perception? No matter how true it may seem, if it’s going to cause you to do something unskillful, it’s not a skillful perception. You’ve got to keep reminding yourself that over and over and over again. And how do you get good at reminding yourself over and over again? Remind yourself to stay here with a breath right now. That’s a lesson in mindfulness you’ve got to learn. Stay here. Stay here. Remember to stay here. And once your mindfulness gets good, it’s better at stitching things together like this in your meditation. It’s going to get better as you deal with things in the world outside, i.e., the people around you. So take this as an object lesson in the power of perception. You can hold in mind perceptions that make it really hard to breathe. You can get fixated on things and the fact that the body is solid all of a sudden becomes a big struggle to get any breath in there at all. If you switch the perception to the idea that the body is just an energy field and even the most solid parts, if you’ve learned anything about physics, have a lot of space in them, try holding that perception in mind and see what happens. There’s plenty to experiment with here, plenty to explore. We’re not just playing around. We’re learning important things about how the mind shapes its experience. And you can try to remember those lessons and see if you can shape the way you act and speak and think throughout the day. By allowing yourself to put other perceptions into play.

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