The Perception of Wilderness (outside)

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Buddha says that when you come out to a place like this, just you and the trees and the breeze, too loud, put aside all your other perceptions, any perception that’s related to back home, your family, your work, just put those aside. Have the perception instead of wilderness. You’re here out in the trees. You’re here out far away from society. And all the affairs and all the issues of being back in society, you can just let them go. Think of wilderness being larger than society. It encompasses everything. There’s forests, and mountains, and the atmosphere, and the oceans. By far the largest part of the earth is still wilderness. So tune your mind into the wilderness. Think of how expansive it is and how small the issues of your daily life are in comparison. So you get the right perspective to meditate. Because otherwise, as you’re here with the breath, you find your mind wandering off to other things. And it’s good to have put up a defense first. Say, “No, that’s not worth going to.”That’s just peanuts compared to what I’m trying “to do here with the breath.” Because otherwise, if the affairs of the world get large, you’re keeping your mind still, and suddenly it becomes a very small thing. It seems very trivial in comparison with the bigger issues out there. But then you realize that the big issues of human beings are still pretty small compared to the wilderness of the world, the wilderness of the solar system. So try to put your mind into that larger frame and appreciate how much disturbance has been put aside when you do have that larger frame. The Buddha calls this entering into emptiness. You see that your mind is empty of the disturbances that used to bother it. They’re not here right now. Appreciate that fact. Realize that the perception you hold in mind makes all the difference. But even with the perception of wilderness, there are disturbances. There are animals out here. There are troubles that can happen. So try to transform attention into the elements. He talks about the earth element, but it can apply to all the different elements or their properties. The elements here are not chemical elements. They’re just the elementary properties that allow you to know that you’ve got a body sitting right here. There’s the wind element, which is a movement of the breath. There’s the earth element, which is a sense of heaviness. There’s the fire element, which is a sense of warmth. There’s the water element, which is a sense of coolness. Allow yourself to hold those perceptions in mind. Your body is just these properties. Everything around you is just these properties. It’s all just properties around you, inside and out. When you can hold that perception in mind, that has even less disturbance. Your mind is even emptier of disturbance. What are you going to learn from these properties? As the Buddha said, they don’t react. People pour horrible things on the earth. The earth doesn’t react. They use fire to burn up garbage. The fire doesn’t react. They use water to wash garbage away. The water doesn’t react. Wind blows these things around. It doesn’t react. This doesn’t mean that you make yourself just dead as a stone. It simply means that you learn how to be not reactive for the purpose of seeing things clearly. If the mind is hyper-reactive all the time, you don’t see anything else. All you see is your reactions. A slight little thing comes your way. Someone says something that, as they say in Thai, sticks in your ear, won’t go smoothly into your ear, and the mind is suddenly all over the place. Well, that kind of mind can’t observe anything carefully, and certainly can’t understand itself. It’s too busy with its reactions. So learn a few lessons from earth, water, wind, and fire. If someone yells at you, remember, your bones aren’t reacting. The fire element is not reacting. It’s just the mind that gets all upset. Try to keep the mind, as they say, in tune with the elements. Then you can observe. When that word was said, what got you upset? It was actually your own attachments, your own preconceived notions about what that person should have said but didn’t, or did say but shouldn’t have said. So the problem isn’t so much with the words as it is with your ideas, holding on to your ideas of what the person should and shouldn’t have said. You might ask, “What’s wrong with having ideas about what people should and shouldn’t do?” The ideas themselves are not wrong, necessarily, although sometimes they are. But even when they’re right, you have to know when to pick them up, when to put them down. If you’re using them to make yourself miserable, you’re misusing them. And when you can see that, then it’s a lot easier to let things go. Things that you should respond to, then you can respond to. If it’s not the time to respond to them yet, okay, you can let them go for the time being. It’s because you’ve trained your mind to be in tune with the earth and in tune with water, wind, and fire. So it can see its own movements and not move together with them. It’s like you have many people in your mind. There are people with these thoughts and people with those thoughts. And then you’ve got an observer. The observer has a few of its thoughts, but you want to train the observer to be able to step out of those other people’s thoughts. You say, “Okay, this thought is making me miserable. Why am I holding on to it?” Let it go. Again, you see the power of perception. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha said perception is one of the things that fabricates your state of mind, that together with feeling. You can be in a situation, perceive it one way, and suffer. You can perceive it in another way, and there’s no suffering at all. This is one of the reasons why we get the mind really quiet. We get it to hold to one perception and see the power of that one perception. At the same time, we’ve made up our mind we’re not going to get involved with other perceptions, and when we do, we notice, “Okay, we’ve slipped off.” And you go back. And if you’re really observant, you begin to see the difference between sticking with a perception of the breath and then following other perceptions. This makes you less likely to keep running with perceptions whenever they come up. So what is the way you perceive the breath right now? Here’s another way of exploring the power of perception over your experience. If you think of the breath just as the air coming in and out, you’ll sense the breathing in one way. If you sense the breath as the energy flow in your nerves and in your blood vessels as well, that is, you breathe in, the breath energy flows throughout the body, all of a sudden you find that breathing is a different process entirely. And if you stick long enough with these perceptions, you begin to see what effect they have on the mind. That way you get even more particular about which kind of perceptions you want to focus on and learn how to stay with the ones that are good. This is why we develop mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. We’re trying to put the mind into good shape, and so you need to figure out which perceptions shape the mind in the direction you want the mind to go. And when you find a good one, you want to be able to stick with it. This is why mindfulness and alertness are a necessary part of the meditation, because mindfulness is keeping something in mind. In this case, you’ve got the perception of the breath that’s helpful to help the mind to settle down with a sense of ease that melts into the body. And then you want to be alert to see if anything else is coming in. And then, of course, ardency, it’s this quality of putting your whole heart into it. So you learn to do it well because you realize the importance of the shape of your mind, the state of your mind. If your mind gets in a bad shape, then your actions are going to be misshaped as well. Your words are going to be misshaped as well. Your thoughts will be misshaped, because the mold from which they come is all crooked. But if you can settle down in the present moment, have a sense of your awareness filling the whole body, everything is stable, everything is balanced. As you breathe in, try to think of different parts of the body that may be missing breath energy and allow that energy to flow there. This is like taking the misshapen mold and getting it back into proper shape. So pay very careful attention to your perceptions. These are the labels we put on things, the little signs that the mind has, either words or visual images. Let’s say this is this and that’s that. It’s like an agreement among the different parts of the mind. One part of the mind is sending a message to another part of the mind, and they’ve got this agreed-on language. This means that, that means this. Label things outside so you can figure out, “What does this mean for me?” Now we want to label things inside in a way that is conducive to getting the mind to settle down. You look not so much at the labels but at the process of making a label and maintaining the label and seeing what impact it has on your experience. In this way, taking what you’ve learned and using that to label things in ways that are more and more appropriate for seeing where you’re putting unnecessary stress in a situation and how you can let it go. So that when you come out of meditation, you’ve learned some lessons not only about being quiet right here, but also lessons about how to label things outside as you’re dealing with other people, as you’re dealing with other tasks. Remember that you have the choice to place labels on things. Nobody can get inside your brain and force a label on you, at least not yet, unless you let them. This is one of the reasons why we have to be very careful about the media. We tend to forget that we have this choice in how we label things. Years ago, we were having a meditation right here. It was a lovely afternoon. It was sunny, but the temperature was pretty much like this. It was cool. There was a nice breeze. This one woman had brought a friend of hers who had never meditated before. She sat through the meditation, and at the end she opened her eyes and said, “I’ve never suffered so much in my life.” Because the problem was what she was labeling in the present moment. All she could think about was how she couldn’t understand the instructions, and she didn’t like sitting still. It starts with the labels, then moves on to thought constructs. Then she was tearing herself up over the thought constructs. Other people were sitting there and having a perfectly fine time. Little pains might come. They might come up here and there, but they learn how not to get tied up in the pains, instead to focus on the comfortable sensations in the body and to nourish those. Learning that what you focus on and how you perceive it will have a huge impact on the experience that results. So here we are in the wilderness. Learn lessons from the wilderness, where with the elements, learn lessons from the elements. Learn lessons from how you put these labels on things, the way you label the breath, the way you label different things coming up in the body and the mind right now. Anything else that comes up aside from the breath or that would pull you away from the breath, you just label it as unimportant, unimportant. Try to emphasize the sensations of breathing, the comfortable sensations. You find that you create a good home for yourself right here. You can, as the Buddha says, alight in a state of mind that is empty of disturbance, empty of unnecessary stress. There may still be some level of disturbance in your concentration, but that’s for you to settle into for a while and then look more deeply. Because once the mind has settled in and has been able to enjoy its concentration, he actually uses the word to indulge in the well-being that comes from concentration. Then you’re in a better position to discern labels that are even more subtle than that and see the impact they’re having even in your concentration. This is how your concentration develops, as you let go of the levels of disturbance and enter into a greater, greater sense of emptiness of disturbance, emptiness of stress. Remember, this is largely a matter of cleaning up your perceptions. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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