Perception & Intention

April 17, 2024

The Buddha saw that the mind is not passive. It’s not the case that it just sits there and moves only when it’s pushed by something or incited by something. It’s out looking for things. This is the process of what the Buddha calls sankara. And as he says, we shape a sense of the form of the body, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness for the sake of something. Usually it’s for the sake of pleasure. And as we’re practicing, the Buddha says, let’s take that habit and do something useful with it. Because sankara is also what’s required for the path. You have to have an intention. To sit here, you have to have the intention to want to concentrate. Now that plays together with your perceptions. Your perceptions have to tell you that, yes, this is a good thing. This is a good use of your time. And you have to maintain that kind of perception as you sit. That’s one of the things you have to watch out for. Either perceptions that go out into the world and tell you you’ve got all this free time, you’ve got a whole hour, you can sit and think about all kinds of things. But then you have to ask yourself, what would be accomplished by that? The mind has been thinking about all kinds of things for who knows how long. And it’s gotten some use out of its thinking, and other times it’s been actually injured by its thinking. Let’s try something else. Let’s try thinking about one thing that’s right here, right now. Focus your attention there and create a state of concentration. Stay with the sense of the body. Breathe in a way that gives rise to a feeling of pleasure. And immediately as you’re thinking about the breathing, a picture will appear in your mind about what the breath does in the body, where you feel it, where the breath enters, where it leaves, how it runs into the body. And ask yourself, is that picture or is that perception the most useful one you can think of? And John Lee offers some thoughts about how the breath can go down the back, down the spine, out the legs, down the shoulders, out the arms and the hands. The breath coming in the middle of the chest, going down through the intestines. All kinds of ways in which you can picture the breath energy to yourself. And that’s why it’s good to think about breath energy. Because when the Buddha classifies the breath, it’s not classified as a tactile sensation. It’s classified as part of one of the elements or elementary properties in the body. So where do you feel in the body? That energy, the energy that allows the air to come in and go out. The energy that goes along with the movement of the blood through the body. Down to the tiniest capillaries. Out in every pore. See what image is most useful right now. And you’ll see that the way you image the breath to yourself will have an impact on how you actually feel it. The sign again, as the Buddha said, that with all phenomena, the mind is their forerunner. They are made by the mind. It’s put first in the Dhammapada. People tend to forget it. After all, it’s just a poem. But it’s put first in the Dhammapada for a reason. It’s talking about how the mind is the agent. The mind is the active principle. And it gets its ideas about its intentions, what it wants to do, from its perceptions. And of course, it’s intentions are going to shape its perceptions as well. If you come into this room looking for something, you’re going to ignore a lot of other things that have nothing to do with that thing you’re looking for. That’s when your perceptions are shaped by your intentions. The same happens as a thought begins to form in the mind. If you have some intentions about what you want that they’re thinking about, then the different parts of the mind will have their different agendas. If something comes up that could be vaguely construed as being connected to that agenda, you’ll slap a perception on the thought and say, “Ah, this is a thought about X. Let’s go with X.” One of the things we do as we get the mind still is to get it so that it can actually see things as they’re happening. The more stillness you have, the more subtle things you’re going to see. So try to be still with the breath. Still with the whole body. Then watch for any other stirrings that will appear in the range of your awareness right now. Sometimes they start as, obviously, physical stirrings. Sometimes it seems to be on the borderline between what’s mental and what’s physical. But either way, look for the stirrings and try to zap them as fast as possible. Breathe through them. That’s one of the reasons why we focus on the breath, because it’s one of our weapons for dealing with the processes of thought in the mind. Because you want to get, as the Buddha said, so you can think whatever thoughts you want to think and don’t think whatever thoughts you don’t want to think. And first, though, you’ve got to learn how to say “no” to all your other thoughts and just think these thoughts about the breath. And this changes your usual intention in dealing with the mind. As you go through the day, there are lots of other thoughts that are perfectly fair game, perfectly legitimate things to think about. But right now you’re saying “no.” You think only of the things related to the breath. Everything else becomes outside of your territory, like that image the Buddha gives of the monkeys up in the Himalayas. If they stay in their territory, they’re safe. If they go wandering off into the area where human beings can also go, they’re in danger, because the human beings will set traps for them. So you want to stay right here with the breath. That’s your safe territory. And open your awareness so it’s receptive to all the breath energies in the body. Think of yourself as being bathed in the breath all around. That’s a good perception to hold in mind. Get skilled with staying with one perception like this, or with relevant perceptions like this, and zapping everything else. It gets you more sensitive as you leave meditation to what you pick up as you go through the day. What thoughts you pick up, what intentions you’re acting on, what perceptions are driving those intentions, and how those intentions drive your perceptions. These things have a huge force in your life. And you want to be able to get some control over them, which means you have to step out of them. As long as you’re in them, they can lead you in almost any direction. The image that John Foon liked to use is that we get led around by the nose. In Thailand, when they want to get a water buffalo to do what they want, they’ll put a ring in it. They’ll put it on its nose and tie a rope to the ring. And then they’ll pull it in the direction they want it to go. Of course, the nose hurts. The buffalo has to go where it’s being pulled. And all too often that’s what happens with our thoughts. They pull us around. We think we’re in charge. We think we’re thinking. Doing the thinking. But a lot of times the thoughts begin to take on almost a life of their own. So you want to see that. You want to step out of that. So you’re not under their power. So we get the mind still. Not just to enjoy the stillness, although it is possible to get some rest here. And that’s one of the reasons why we practice concentration, is to get some rest. But it’s rest so that we can then have strength to do the work that’s needed to understand our minds. And then to take those insights out and use them in daily life. This is one of the most important insights you can have, is the extent to which you are shaping things. And how you can get some control over that process of shaping. So it can take you where you want to go. I mean, that’s what the path is all about. Sometimes we’re told, “We don’t have any thought fabrications. We don’t have any fabrications at all. Just be with whatever’s already there.” But that’s not the path that the Buddha recommended. You shape the mind into a state of concentration. That requires intention. Fabrication. The whole path, he said, is fabricated. Starting from right view all the way to right concentration. He says it’s the best thing you can put together in your mind. So give the path a try. Do your best to shape it well. And as you shape the path, you begin to gain insight. Lots of insights into this process of fabrication in the mind that’s going on all the time. You learn how to do something good with it. Instead of just following it through the force of habit, you become more and more conscious of what you’re doing. That allows you to see where you’re doing it with lack of skill. You bring in more skill. To the point where it actually delivers you to something that is not fabricated. This apparently is what the Buddha meant when he said that the mind is luminous. It can observe itself. We’re not just creatures of habit. We can see what we’re doing. We can see we’re doing it well. Or we’re doing it not well. And if we learn how to pay attention to the right things, that luminous quality can take us far.

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