

## *Shifting Your Paradigm*

*January 4, 2004*

This afternoon we were talking about perception, the way our minds label things, as a way of stocking the labels away in our memory so that we can recognize things the next time they come. The mind has a kind of filing system, a whole set of perceptions for how it perceives things, how it fits things into different molds before they can get filed away. When we look carefully at the way our minds work, we notice that the filing system is often a major cause of trouble. Things come up in the mind, and we immediately label them as this, that, the other thing. Things happen to us from outside and we label them as this, that, the other thing. Then the labels turn around and bite us, make us suffer, make us do things that we know we shouldn't be doing.

So the question comes: How can we change the filing system? How can we change our pattern of looking at things, and make what's called a paradigm shift?

There are two ways. One, you can think your way into a new way of seeing things, or, two, you can look more carefully at the raw data of experience until you see that your old patterns of labeling are pretty arbitrary.

When we meditate, we apply both approaches. Sometimes we systematically explore new ways of looking at things intentionally. But for those new ways of looking at things to really sink into the mind, we have to adopt that second approach as well. Just look at the raw data—what's coming in—and see that you could label it in other ways. That helps pull you out of your old patterns of thinking and gets you right at the basic building blocks.

This is what we do as we meditate. Get down to the raw experience of breath. How many layers of perception do you have to go through to get to that raw experience? Actually, quite a few. But it's a practice that's worth pursuing, no matter how many layers you have to go through, because the more you go through, then the more clearly you see things, and the more you realize that there are other ways of looking at what you've been experiencing.

For example, the whole question of the breath in the body. We tend to think of the body as a solid lump sitting here, and then air comes in and out of the lungs through the nose, and that air is the breath. Then that perception of the body sitting here as a big lump affects the way we actually breathe, the way we experience the breath. When we read about breath energy going through the nervous system, along the blood vessels, out through the pores, it sounds pretty strange, very foreign, as if you have to go over to Asia for it to make sense. But

actually it's a different way of perceiving the raw material you've been experiencing all along, that you've got right here right now. And it's a very useful way of perceiving it, because it allows the breath to become more comfortable throughout the body. So try to get as close to the breath as possible, close to your sense of the body as possible. Allow yourself to inhabit the whole body, and then watch: What is the experience of being in the body right here? What is it like?

If you allow yourself to think of it as an energy body, you begin to notice things that you didn't notice before, simply because your old pattern of perception didn't allow for it. So survey the body, what you've got right here, right now, from head on down to the toes, down the arms, down the back. What does it feel like? When you breathe in, what does it feel like? When you breathe out, what does it feel like? Where do you notice the sensations that correspond to the in-breath and the out-breath? Are they tense? If they are, then relax them. Go systematically through the body, relaxing every little piece of tension you can notice.

If you can't notice any tension, consciously flex your muscles for a minute in different parts of the body, and then relax them. You'll run into some areas that are already pretty tense, that you don't have to flex at all. Those are the spots you want to work on. That sensation of relaxation corresponds to the breath. Allow yourself to think of it as breath. It's not that you're changing the sensation, you're changing your perception, and then the perception itself allows for new sensations to come in that you didn't notice before—not that they weren't there before, simply that they were blocked by the perception, but now they're allowed to come up to the surface.

This is what paradigm shift is all about. The data that under the old system just kept getting thrown out, thrown out, thrown out, because it didn't make sense under the old system, suddenly becomes too insistent. It's there. Someone decides to take it seriously. It's not that they sit down and say: "I want to be a great person in history, I want to come up with a paradigm shift." That usually doesn't work. What works is just looking at the data that you used to throw away.

And it's the same with meditation. Just notice the sensations that are going on in the body. When you begin to see that there is a sense of energy there, there is a kind of flow—it's either blocked or it's free-flowing—then as you relax, you begin to get a greater sense of flow. You see how much there is to explore here, this territory that you thought you knew, but when you really look at it very carefully, you realize it contains a lot going on that you didn't know before.

This is what makes the meditation fascinating. There's always a lot to learn about the breath, new ways of conceiving how it goes in, how it goes out, how the

breath energies in the different parts of the body relate to one another. What happens, say, in the leg when you can release some the tension in your neck? There is a connection. Or releasing tension in your lower back: What that does for your upper back, or your neck? There's lots to explore. Even though these things may not necessarily be written in the texts, still it's a way of getting into the present moment, and of opening yourself up to some of the possibilities that you didn't think were there before.

As you begin to settle in, you feel more and more at home in the present moment, both because it's more comfortable and because it's more interesting than it used to be. You're not staying here simply because you were told to stay here. Try that with a child: Tell him sit on this stool. "For what reason?" "Simply because I tell you to stay here." The child is sure to find some reason to get away pretty fast as soon as you turn your back.

Well, it's the same with your mind. Say, "Stay with the breath." "Why?" "Because I told you so." That kind of reasoning doesn't work. Say, "But look, here's something to play with, you've got this big doll right here, this life-sized doll. You can play with the energy flow." Give that kind of toy to a child and he's not going to think of going away anymore. He gets more and more interested in exploring what he's got, and using his imagination.

It's the same with your mind. Give the mind something to explore here, especially something that helps to create a greater sense of well-being, a greater sense of strength, a greater sense of openness, stability, a good place to stay right here. The mind will be happy to stay.

In this way, the way you play around with the breath, the way you explore the breath, leads you into concentration in one of two ways: One, after a while the mind just gets tired of playing around and really wants to rest. So it settles in and just stays with the breath. The other way is when you realize that you've taken the breath about as far as you can take it—the energy in the body feels full, everything is flowing just fine—and no matter how much you adjust the breath, you're not going to get any better. That's another reason to stop all the adjusting, stop all the playing, and just focus on in being really, really at one.

In this way, the meditation teaches you a lot of good lessons about the power of perception, how the way you perceive things really shapes your experience. On the negative side, it can filter out a lot of useful things that are there. You may tend to emphasize things that either are unimportant or actually are harmful for you.

Once you've learn this lesson in terms of the breath, you can turn around and look at the mind. You find the same process going on: Things happen that

normally would set you off, but look precisely at the thing that's happening. On the one hand, you know that you don't want to get angry, you don't want to get lustful, or you don't want to indulge in fear, yet you find yourself following these patterns over and over again. So you've got to look at the raw material with the intention of changing your perceptions. Look at precisely the thing that set you off. Is it really all that bad? Does it have to result in anger? Does it have to result in lust? Does it have to result in fear? Can you look at it from another side? The closer you get to the precise perception itself that sets you off, the easier it is to change. The closer you get, then the more arbitrary your old patterns of thought, your old patterns of perception begin to seem.

So we're trying to get as close as we can to the immediate present. Even though it's still going to be shaped by a type of perception, you want to have better perceptions, more useful perceptions, perceptions that don't pull you in directions you don't want to go, that make you say or do things that you later are going to regret.

Years back, I was staying in Bangkok, in the back of the monastery. Right across the wall, in the back corner of the monastery, was a little store that opened up at four in the morning and played a huge boom box. The first time it happened, I wondered, "How on Earth am I going to meditate in a situation like this?" Then I remembered Ajaan Chah talking about how it's not that we're being disturbed by the sound, *we're* the ones disturbing the sounds—we're the ones talking about the sounds in our mind, making issues out of them.

So I tried to look very carefully at what that sensation of sounds was. There was a physical sensation that went along with it. It wasn't just in the ears, because it was a boom box with a really deep bass. I found that the closer I got to the actual perception of the sound, the more my own body, my sensation the body, seemed to change. I could think of it as a screen through which the sound just passed through, and it wasn't catching the sound. I thought later of a passage in the Canon talking about the mind of the ideal meditator: It's like a net that doesn't catch the wind. That perception made it a lot easier to meditate and to get out of the old stories I used to tell myself about sounds and people who make sounds.

You can apply this to just about anything that comes in, any perception. When the Buddha talks about restraint of the senses, he's not saying that you don't look, or that you run away from your perception. You just notice which of the details set you off, and you learn not to focus on those details. You realize there are other details you can focus on. It all comes down to that set of perceptions that you normally apply things that create issues, that harm you.

So you try to get as close to the present moment as possible, so that you can make the shift there. That verse we chanted now on friends: It doesn't apply only to friends outside, it also applies to patterns of thought in our own minds, the patterns that give rise to lust, the patterns that give rise to laziness. When you feel weak and unable to do anything, just look at precisely what are the perceptions, what are the sensations that say that you're weak. Look at them very carefully, very precisely. You begin to realize that they don't have to carry that message at all. You're the one who applies the message.

So the best way to get out of our old habits, the old patterns of behavior, is to try to break things down to precisely what's happening right here, right now, just in terms of little events that are happening: the sensations in the body, perceptions, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas, as they come. You get them as close as possible to just simply events, in and of themselves. That's what allows you to make your shift.

The same principle applies when you get up in the morning. You lie there, you're awake, but you say, "I'm still too sleepy, I can't get up." Well, ask yourself, "Precisely what sensation tells you that you're too sleepy, that you're still too tired, that you didn't have enough sleep?" Just go through your body. Is it this sensation? Is it that sensation? Which is the one that prevents you from getting up? You realize that there's nothing. So you get up.

Break things down so that they're manageable. As you break them down, you find you start making bigger shifts in your mind as well.

In this way, this simple exercise of exploring your breath in the present moment teaches you lessons that can make you a different person, that allow you to make changes in habits and behavior, learning to drop patterns that are not your friends, and to hang out with the ones who are. Because when you get into the mind, it's not just a matter of hanging around with friends. You tend to identify with those patterns. If they're harmful patterns, there you are: You're identifying with your enemies, with your non-friends, as the verse would say.

So instead, try look for the true friends. Where do you look for them? Right here in your immediate sensations. That's what allows you to change the people you're hanging around with inside, so that your perceptions, instead of being harmful to yourself and the people around you, actually become helpful. They become part of the path.