

Alternative Conceptions

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When you look at the breath, there's not just the sensation of the breathing. You find that there's also your perception of breath, the mental image you have of it. It's not the case that you have the pure sensation and then you add the mental image on top of it. Sometimes the mental image will determine what you sense.

You want to learn to take advantage of that fact. There are different ways of perceiving the breath, different ways of conceiving the breath. Some are helpful, some are not. Some of them make the breath really comfortable, others make it difficult. Some of them relate to the way you conceive your whole relationship to the body. Many of us tend to think that the basic sensation of the body is of the solid parts, and you have to pull the breath into the solid parts, like a bellows.

Once you have that conception, then you breathe in a way that actually confirms the conception. There's a sense of pulling in, pushing out, and there are not too many openings whereby you can pull it and push it out. That's why that way of conceiving of the body and the breath actually adds tension to the process. So you might want to try other ways of conceiving it that reduce the tension. Think of your primary sensation the body as breath energy. It's because of the breath that you sense the solid parts. The energy is the primary sensation, and solidification is something that happens later.

Which means there's breath already all over the body. You don't have to pull it in, you don't have to push it out. There's no squeezing, there's no pressure, no pumping that's really needed. This energy connects to every pore of the skin, so you can think of the energy coming in and out of the body from all directions, and it's just waiting there at the skin to come in. It's simply a question of your allowing it in, relaxing the little muscles all over your skin enough so that the breath can come in, go out, with no problem. Think of the breath sneaking in behind you, coming from all directions.

When you can think of it that way, it changes your whole relationship to the process. And the process actually changes. There's a greater sense of fullness, ease, refreshment in the breath. You don't have to pull in; you don't have to push out.

Playing with your perceptions in this way is a very important part of the practice. It's not just a game. To begin with, it makes it easier to stay in the present moment. There's a greater sense of comfort and ease as you sit here. And secondly, you also see the power of perception, how much simply changing an image in your mind changes your physical experience.

That's an important insight. It gets you down to the basic level where insight happens, what the Buddha called name and form together with consciousness. Form, of course, is the form of the body, how it feels from inside as we're sitting right here: the sense of warmth, which is the fire element; the solidity, which is the earth element; the liquidity, the water element; and the flow of energy, which is the wind or the breath element. That's form.

As for name, you've got feelings, perceptions, contact, intention, and attention. Those are the raw materials for gaining insight. Reducing everything in your experience just to those terms helps you to see the connections, to see how you fabricate things in such a way that leads to suffering, or in such a way that doesn't. That's the basic value of all these teachings.

Some people think that meditation is aimed at stripping away all of our preconceived notions, all of our conditionings, and getting down to know pure sensory experience. Well, sensory experience is never pure. It's never devoid of mental preconceptions. Look at dependent co-arising: You've got ignorance and fabrication, name and form, consciousness, and *then* the six senses. Already prior to that basic sensory experience, you've got a lot of stuff going on.

So it's not a matter seeing things in terms of some pristine experience that's freed from our conditioning yet somehow still in the realm of conditioning, i.e., in the world of the six senses. The only place you're going to get really pure experience is outside of the realm of the senses, where the realm of the senses ceases.

What you do with conditioned experience is that you learn how to shape it in such way that leads to that outside: what ways of perceiving are helpful in that direction, what kinds of intentions are helpful in that direction. This path that we're following, as the Buddha said, is a kind of karma: the karma that puts an end to karma. So it's a kind of intention. And there's attention, the way you look at things. You could look at things in terms of your self, or you can look at things in terms of four noble truths, which basically reduces things to activities.

And once you raise those questions in the mind, what are the activities here? How do our perceptions act? How do our feelings act? Instead of turning these things into a sense of self, you look at them simply as activities and see where they lead. That way, you get a sense of how you should shape your perceptions and your feelings in ways that are helpful in terms of this path we're trying to follow.

For example, with feelings: We talked today about how there's a tendency when there's stress in different parts of the body to connect all the little spots of stress and tension and make a big web of tension throughout the body. One pain connects to another pain and makes things really miserable. Sometimes you can

barely breathe with all these bands of tension running around your body. And we know how it's like playing connect-the-dots. It's a kind of a malicious connect-the-dots. It's not just drawing one straight line from one dot to the next.

I once knew of a novice in Thailand who was a very good artist. A game he liked to play was that he would have somebody put three dots on a piece of paper, anywhere on the paper, and then he would make a drawing of that person connecting the dots and without lifting his pen from the paper. It was more than just straight lines, it was a whole picture with lines curling and curving all over the place. And that's what we tend to do in our own minds. We take a little piece of tension here, a little pain there, and we make all kinds of faces out of those bands of tension. That's using feeling and your perception of feeling in an unskillful way. It doesn't help the practice at all.

What you want to do is learn how to connect the spots where it's comfortable, where there's a sense of ease, where there's a sense of a fullness. And there are other spots in the body, as the Buddha said, where if you pay appropriate attention to them, they turn into rapture. So if there are all these bands of tension in the body, or if pain seems to have taken over part of the body, try to look for the openings in those bands of tension or for openings in that solid block of the pain. It's not one solid thing. These are not solid bands of tension. They're actually little dots of sensation that you've drawn together. Erase the lines that you've drawn.

Then consider this sense of ease, the sense of energy, that just wants to flow in and be full, cruising around and through those bands of tension, so that you've got a different kind of connection. You've got the connection of all these full and easy spots so that it overwhelms everything else in the body.

Then apply just the right amount of perception and awareness to maintain that. And you find that it's useful. One, it really does create a sense of ease here. Two, you've learned a lot about perception. You've learned about how feelings and perceptions can be turned into part of the path. They're not just a given. You fabricate them. You've taken the raw material that comes in from past actions and turned it into something that's either useful or not, something unskillful or not.

So learn to imagine other ways of connecting things. Learn to imagine other possibilities. We don't often think of imagination as part of the path. Imagination we mainly connect with the creation of other worlds that pull us away from the present moment. But here you use your imagination in the present, thinking of different ways of fashioning the present, different ways of fashioning your feelings and your perceptions, so that you can create the ease and well-being of right concentration. And then the concentration then becomes a good basis for insight,

not simply because it makes the mind still enough so that you can see, but also because, in the process of creating the concentration, you've learned a lot about how the mind puts things together.

This is why the Buddha, when teaching meditation, simply said, "Go do jhāna." He didn't say, "Go do vipassanā," or "Go do samatha," because both the tranquility and insight are implicit in the practice of really understanding how to create this sense of settled ease and well-being in the mind.

So the potentials for right concentration are already there in the feelings and the possibilities for perception. Simply learn how to put them together in the right way. All the ingredients you need are here. It's like learning how to be a good cook, both in the creation of the sense of ease, and then in the maintenance. Just keeping it going, and you'll learn an awful lot about the mind.

Simply remember that every time you're faced with a difficult situation, you've got choices. Some of the choices lead to suffering. Some of the choices lead to the end of suffering. It's up to you. You want to have the imagination to realize that there are other choices. Think of Prince Siddhartha. When he wanted to leave home, his friends all said, "Oh it's impossible, this idea of a happiness that's not based on conditions. Nobody's ever found in the past. All the great people of the past have contented themselves with what can be found in the ordinary sensory world." They couldn't imagine what he was talking about. Maybe they were even threatened by the idea. In other words, if an unconditioned happiness were possible and they weren't working toward it, they felt threatened.

So they tried to block the possibility out of their minds and, as a result, they never found anything that was anything more than the ordinary pleasures you see all around. But Prince Siddhartha had the imagination to say, "This could be possible, let's give it a try." That's what enabled him to find a way out, to find that unconditioned happiness.

So always allow room in your imagination for that. When things get tough in the practice, allow some room in your imagination to think, "Maybe there are some choices here that I haven't realized. Maybe I'm not stuck in a dead-end. Maybe there's some other way of doing things."

It's like that riddle they pose: Suppose you're dreaming, and you find yourself in a ship with different members of your family: your parents, your children. And you've got too many people in the ship. You know that if all of you stay in the ship, you're all going to die. Somebody's got to go. Who would you choose? What would you do?

I have a friend who likes to pose this riddle to different people. He's found that if you pose it to adults, they stop and think for long periods of time, and it's a

really anguished decision. But if you pose it to children, they'll say immediately, "Well, wake up. Get out of the dream."

So there are more choices than you might think. You're sitting here with the body. There may be pains, but there are different ways you can deal with them, more than you might think. Allow some room in your imagination for new ways of perception, new ways of attending to the pain, i.e., the questions you ask about the pain, and new intentions you can have toward the pain. Our basic intention is to get rid of it. The Buddha says that if it's a pain, the wise thing to do with the pain is try to comprehend it. That's a different alternative entirely.

Always remember there may be more choices than you might think, even in something as basic as this. So always leave room in your imagination for that possibility.