

Mindfulness & Perception

August 9, 2006

Okay, focus in on your breath—and remind yourself to stay here. The reminding is mindfulness. This is a point that's often misunderstood. Mindfulness is paired with alertness. Alertness is what watches, sees what's going on, and particularly, what you're doing right now and the results you're getting from what you're doing. Mindfulness is what keeps your task in mind, reminds you keep staying here, staying here, staying here, don't go wandering off. And you have to use perception to stay here. The perception might just be a word, like "breath" or "in, out," or it could be a picture in the mind, something that acts as a label. Without that label, you wouldn't know where to focus. You'd lose your train of thought. You'd lose the thread.

So these two things go together: mindfulness and perception. Perception is like a little arrow. It points you in a particular direction, whereas mindfulness is what keeps the arrow there, present in your awareness, so that it doesn't suddenly disappear. In the beginning of the meditation, you may not have to think much about this. Just focus your attention on the breath, and the mind's old habits of focusing will do that. There will be an arrow and, for the least little while, the ability to remember. But then you forget. You drop the perception. It may take you a while before you come back.

This is where you need to know exactly what the mechanics are, so that if you lose the thread, you can come back. You know exactly what to use to get back. These are your tools.

This is an important element of the meditation. The Buddha has you use all of the khandhas, all the aggregates, as tools in the practice. That's what right concentration does. It takes the khandhas and turns them into tools, turns them into a path.

You've got the sense of the body sitting here, so you're going to focus on one part of it. You're going to focus on the breath part, or the breath aspect. That comes under the aggregate of form. There are going to be feelings of pleasure and pain, so you learn how to cultivate the breath in such a way that gives rise to pleasure. Use a perception to remind yourself to stay here. Then there's fabrication, especially in the first stage of right concentration: You've got to keep directing your thoughts to the breath and evaluating it. What feels good right now? How is it going along? Is the mind settling down? If not, what can you do? And then there's the consciousness of all this. There you are: You've got all five

aggregates working together—because you want to see them together. You want to get everything in one place, in a place where things are still, calm, and you can watch what's going on as these things interact. You don't want to be distracted by other things running off to other levels.

This is why right concentration is such an important part of the path because it brings all the things you're going to need for insight together right here. It starts by seeing these things in terms of what's skillful, what's not, cause and effect. I mentioned this morning that the Buddha said the beginning of wisdom is realizing there are some things you like to do that are pleasant and give good results, things you like to do that give bad results, things you don't like to do but give good results, and things you don't like to do and give bad results. Those are the four kinds of actions there are in the world. Wisdom lies in focusing on two of them: the things you don't like to do but give good results, and things you do like to do but give bad results. You have to look at these actions in terms of cause and effect, and realize that the issue is not whether you like something but whether it's going to give good results in the long term.

To help you along the path, the Buddha gives you something that eventually you're going to like to do it and gives good results: in other words, the practice of concentration. Once you get used to it, once you've mastered it, it's really pleasant. The mind keeps tending in that direction. You know it's a good place to be. Of course, there will come times when even though you know it's a good place to be, you don't want to do it. Then you know you've got a problem. That's something you want to look into.

This is how you gain insight. It's not just by passively watching things coming and going and learning how, as I was reading today, you don't want to try to change things, you just watch the change. Well, any scientist will tell you just simply watching change is not going to give you much knowledge at all. It's when you play with the causes and see what difference it makes in effects: That's when you gain knowledge. That's when you really know what's connected to what.

In terms of the meditation, you also run into this issue of likes and dislikes. Do you like to do it? Well, some days you know it's a good thing to do, and you know that if you really sat down you'd have good results, but you still don't want to do it. So you've got to look into that. You know you've got a problem you've got to figure out.

That's where you start playing with things, looking into the issue, and learning how to overcome whatever resistance you have. That's where real wisdom lies. It's not just in passively watching things. It's in learning how to get over your likes and dislikes, to see through them, because there are some strange assumptions that lie

underneath them. When you run up against a wall like this, that's when you begin to dig down and learn interesting things about the mind. Hopefully, you can come to a point where you really see through what the particular defilement was, why were you lazy, why were you resistant. In the digging down, you find ultimately that there wasn't any really good reason at all, but for some reason it had taken over, it has usurped a position of power in your mind. But when you learn how to get around it, that's how wisdom develops.

So wisdom is an issue of cause and effect. That's why right view is expressed in terms of the four noble truths, the causes and the effects related to suffering and its end. You're not just watching things arise and pass away. If you get to a stage where that's all you're doing, okay, that's because for that particular moment in the meditation, that's the most useful thing to do. But you're still at the level of doing. Simply watching, watching, watching is not the end of karma. It's a kind of karma. There is an intention there. There is a label in the back of the mind, reminding you, "Just watch, just watch."

So these things are all there. As a skilled meditator, though, you'll learn when are the skillful times just to watch, and when are the skillful times to be more proactive. That's how wisdom develops. It develops in the direction of getting stronger and more refined concentration, until the insight comes, not simply in learning how to get the mind to meditate, or learning how to get the mind to settle down into the meditation, but also learning how to gain insight while you're in concentration.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, there comes a point when you've really been thoroughly immersed, say, in the breath, and you can lift the mind up above the breath just a little bit—not so much to break the concentration, but just enough to start observing the state of concentration again, asking questions again.

Here you have all five of the khandhas, and they're all doing things. Remember, the khandhas, the aggregates, are not things. They're activities. So the whole principle of cause and effect applies here as well. If you latch on to these activities, what happens? Even on this subtle level, you begin to see that there still is some stress. What are you holding on to that's causing the stress? The stress has to be in clinging to the aggregates. The aggregates themselves are not the Buddha's definition of stress. It's the clinging: That's what you've got to look for, because that's something you can do something about. You begin to see the clinging itself as an activity: You just keep at these activities, keep at that these activities, again and again and again. That's clinging. You're *doing* the suffering.

At this point, the Buddha isn't telling you to stop concentrating, because you'll just have other aggregates taking their place. The issue is: Can you let go of

aggregates altogether? The only place you can do that is from this place of really good concentration, because it requires balance, it requires solidity in the mind, not to get knocked off into other aggregates.

So this issue of cause and effect applies all away through the practice. And to see cause and effect, as I said, you've got to learn how to play with the causes. Otherwise, you don't know what's connected to what. And you have to make sure that your gaze is steady and continuous, because otherwise you'll lose track of connections. One cause may happen in one moment, and the effect several moments later, but if you're not continually aware, you won't see the connection.

So it's both the ability to watch continually and the ability to be more proactive: Those two qualities working together allow you to gain the kind of insight that leads to liberation. So don't get stuck in a Johnny-one-note kind of meditation where you just do one thing over and over and over again without questioning or reflecting. You've got to look to see: What's the appropriate approach to take right now? You learn through trial and error. And you learn by trying to develop concentration. You learn by asking questions, bringing all these qualities of mind together, bringing all these aggregates together right here, putting them in shape so that you can really watch them, really learn from them, and really let them go.