

The Power of Perception

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When you're concentrated on the breath, you're trying to hold one perception in mind: just the label, "breath." Think for a minute about what the breath can be. It can be the feeling of the air coming in and out through the nose; it can be the feeling of the energy coursing through your body. It's all part of what they call the wind element in Pali. The wind can be still; the wind can move. The same with the breath: The breath can be still; the breath can move.

The difference between simply breathing and focusing on the breath lies in this perception, your ability to maintain the perception of breath without dropping it. So as you concentrate on the breath, there will be that label in the back of the mind. When the breath is coming in, when the breath is going out, there is still "breath, breath, breath." It may be very subtle, so subtle that you can hardly sense it, but it's there. A lot of the skill in meditation is learning how to maintain this perception of breath without dropping it. That's how your meditation begins to take on power, the power to change your mind.

Normally, the mind is fragmented with all sorts of perceptions, ideas, and intentions, and they can affect the mind for good or bad. The problem in many cases is that it's all pretty random. We stick with one perception for a while then drop it to move off to something else, and then something else. It's like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometime it falls on this end, sometimes it falls on that end, sometimes it fall splat in the middle, without any real pattern. When our minds have no real patterns, then our lives have no pattern as well, wandering around from one concern to the next, giving in to doing what's most pressing as opposed to what may be most important.

This is why it's good to come out to a place like this, where the pressures of your daily life are far away. Of course, some of you may be carrying some of them here with you, but you can use the power of perception to hold them at bay. There's a sutta where the Buddha makes a comparison like this. He says it's like a monk going out into the wilderness and simply holding on first to the perception of "wilderness," that you're out in the wilds where the security of home, and the wall between you and the elements, you and the animals, is gone. But there's also a large space between you and all the pressures of being at home, the people you normally deal with, the issues that come with those people. If you can hold that perception of "wilderness" in mind, those other pressures of family and home and society get farther and farther away. You begin to see them in their proper

proportion, that they're really not all that important. They seem important when they're screaming in your ears, but when you get farther away from them, then the sound of their screams and yells gets weaker and weaker.

The Buddha gives that as an illustration of the power of perception, that you can empty your mind a lot of disturbance simply by changing your perception. In the beginning, you do go to a place that's like wilderness just to get away so that your mind can gain some confidence in its power to hold on to a perception, and keep other concerns at bay.

The real trick is to be able to carry that wilderness of the mind back into your daily life. That's why we practice working with the breath, taking that same issue of perception and simply applying it to the breath, so that when you go back into your daily life, you've still got the breath right there, and the breath can be your connection to something separate, something that stands back a little bit from the rush of daily concerns and can see them in perspective.

When people go out on retreat, they often talk about trying to take retreat mind back into the world. This is how you do it, by practicing while you're in seclusion, while you're in a quiet place, to hold on to perceptions in spite of the disturbances that come from outside—and the even bigger disturbances that come from within. So a place like this helps you to see things in perspective, that there are other things a lot more important than the things that are most pressing, most demanding. When you learn how to hold on to the perception of breath while you're here in a place with relatively few disturbances, few disruptions, few distractions, then you've got a foundation for carrying that skill back in to a place where there are more disruptions and distractions.

There's a passage where the Buddha calls concentration a "perception attainment." The perception lies at the heart of what we're doing here, maintaining the perception of breath all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, and then learning how to augment that perception, because a perception on its own can't withstand the force of a lot of the things coming through the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body. If you augment the perception with the comfortable perception of breath, that gives it strength, gives it staying power.

So allow the actual sensation of the breath to be comfortable, combined with the perception, and then the associations you build up around that perception: that the breath can be your friend, the breath can be soothing, and the breath can be comfortable, the breath can permeate every pore of your body, can bathe every cell. When you have those associations with the breath, then it's really nice to

carry it around, knowing you can tap into it anytime you want, anytime you need it.

So while you're here, work on the skill of maintaining that perception. Be alert, be mindful, and stick with it. Those three qualities that are required for establishing a frame of reference, for establishing mindfulness, are the ones that are going to give it staying power.

So we're here to practice, we are here to train.

The other day I read someone saying that Buddhism is an ongoing conversation about the meaning of human life. But you notice, there's not much conversation going on here. There is conversation going on in your mind, but it's good to question when people say things like that. For one thing, the whole idea of "Buddhism" is a Western idea. Over in Asia they talk about the Buddha's way, the Buddha's teachings, the Buddha's message. And what is the essence of the message? It's not in the words or the conversation, it's in the training. The Buddha taught a way to train the mind. We're here to train, so think of what that entails. You're working at a skill. If you find yourself falling off the breath, well, you pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back on the breath again.

Then there's the idea of conversing about the meaning of life. I don't think the Buddha ever mentioned the word "meaning of life," or the meaning of what it is to be human. He did talk, though, about how to understand suffering so that you can put an end to it. And he offered a training: That's what we're doing: It's a training. Essentially, the training is our ability to learn how to stick with the perception of breath, keep that label of breath in mind, keep the breath going comfortably, in all kinds of situations. The skill in doing this is how you carry the retreat or carry the seclusion back into an unsecluded world.

It's something very subtle, but as you strengthen it, you find the power of your perceptions really does make a difference in your life. It really can alleviate suffering. That's what the Buddha said, that's what all of his noble disciples have said, and the only way you can know if it's right is to train yourself to put it into practice and see what results you get. Actually submit to the training and see what changes it makes in your life.