

Agreements to Perceive

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The Pali word we translate as perception or mental label, *sañña*, has another meaning as well: an agreement.

In part, it's an agreement between one part of the mind and the other. This is how the mind communicates with itself, how it makes notes, how it interprets and remembers things. It interprets this particular experience in this particular way and there's an agreement as to what the interpretation means.

We pick up some of the pattern for our inner dialogue from our outside dialogues. Language is a set of agreements. We all agree to speak the same language, and when we say things, we agree to common meanings. There's the general agreement about the language as a whole, such as English all across America. But there are also specific agreements among certain groups of friends. Words and phrases will have one meaning in one group of friends, and another meaning in another group. And often you find that when you're sitting here, even though you maybe sitting here all alone not talking to anybody, you're carrying the friends' meanings in your head, the agreements you had among your friends about what means what. And this includes not only recent friends, but also friends and family that go way back.

This is one of the reasons why you should be very careful about choosing your friends, because a lot of these agreements are unstated. They're implied, and there are a lot of unspoken assumptions in those implications. So you have to be careful about what assumptions you're picking up from them and whose assumptions you're picking up.

This is also why, as you meditate, you should learn how to test your perceptions. You have your own internal language for things, in particular things that are going on in the body and mind, such as pleasure and pain, or your experience of the breath. Learn how to question that language. The way you label the breath, the way you label states of mind as they happen, the way you label what's important and what's not important to pay attention to: These are all major issues in the meditation.

I remember, when I was studying with Ajaan Fuang, that things would happen in my meditation that I'd get all excited about: "This must mean this; that must mean that." I'd go and report them to him and he seemed not the least bit interested. Other times, though, I'd come across something that didn't strike me as very important and yet he would fasten on that. And it turned out, of course, that the things he would fasten on were the ones that actually made a big difference in the meditation.

So you have to be careful about your assumptions as you're coming to meditate. Be willing to relearn your ideas about what's important in the meditation and what's not. And look at the assumptions underlying your internal agreements.

One of the big assumptions is the question of how things happen in the meditation. A really popular assumption is that you sit here waiting for something to happen and, if you're patient enough, something will come along. But the Buddha's discovery was that these things come from causes and they come from what you do. Some of the things will come from what you did in the past, over which you have no control, but a lot of things happening in the meditation come from what you're doing right now. And the way you label things falls into the second category, even though the labels you apply can come from the past. The choice as to which label to apply to which experience is something you're doing in the present. So you want to be careful and pay close attention to how you label things.

Take, for instance, your sense of the body right here, right now. Buried deep down inside in many of us is the idea that we're sitting here with a solid body that has liquid coursing through it, and then the breath comes in and out certain parts of it, through openings in the solid parts, but our primary experience of the body is its solidity. Try turning that perception around. Think of your basic experience of the whole body as breath: either in-and-out breathing or the breath flowing through the blood vessels, through the nerves. After all, without that breath you wouldn't sense the body at all. You'd be dead. The experience of the breath comes prior to the experience of the other properties.

So learn to look at your sensation of the body as a set of variations on the breath energy. And then work with that perception. If there's a blockage or a sense of tightness in the body, don't perceive it as solidity. Perceive it as a sign that the breath isn't running right. Maybe you're trying to push it in a direction that it doesn't want to go. Well, try reversing your idea of how the breath should flow as you breathe in, how it should flow as you breathe out.

And then there's that whole issue of pulling the breath in and pushing it out. What's doing the pulling? What's doing the pushing? That's breath energy, too. So you want to coordinate that with the other sensations that you've labelled breath, so that there's no fighting in the body. When there's no fighting, then it's a lot easier to settle down and stay with the body. There's a sense of fullness that comes when there's no fighting, when each part of the body is allowed to be energized and is not being squeezed or pushed aside in order to energize something else. Each has its own right to be. Each part of the body has its own way of getting the breath energy without having to push it or pull it across something else. Try thinking of the breath in that way.

It's as if your body is a big sponge, with all sorts of openings for the breath to come in and out, so that there's no fighting, no quarreling in the body.

That's one set of perceptions you can play with.

Another is the whole issue of thoughts coming into the mind. When a thought comes into the mind, a part of the mind will say, "I've got to look into this, to see what this is all about. Maybe there's entertainment. Maybe there's something important." Learn to switch that perception around. Look at the thought as an energy that's simply bubbling up in the mind. And realize that if it has any meaning, it's the meaning you're giving to it. And when that's the

case, why bother with it?

After all, you're the one that's going around giving meanings to things. They in and of themselves don't have meanings. And you're communicating with yourself in sending a little message from one part of the mind to another. As for the underlying assumption you've got to look into every thought that comes into the mind: Well, you don't. Reprogram those messages. Learn to create new agreements inside the mind.

For example, you can agree with yourself that when a thought comes up, you'll learn how to recognize the incipient symptoms, even before it's coagulated into something that you can clearly identify as a thought about this or that topic. There'll be a little stirring in the mind. Sometimes it seems to be on the border between what's physical and what's mental: just a little stirring. Keep it at that level, right on the borderline between physical and mental, and breathe through it as quickly as you can.

This will involve a lot of reordering of your basic assumptions, your basic priorities. The breath becomes more important, your sense of stillness becomes more important, and the thoughts get pushed down to a lower level. Instead of being something to explore and take on as a new world, a thought becomes simply an event that you have to watch out for. When you can change your priorities like this, change your inner agreements like this, it has a big impact on the meditation. At the very least, you begin to see how many of these subconscious agreements, subconscious assumptions, you've been carrying around. And when you realize that you don't have to follow or carry them around, it becomes really liberating.

So learn to question your assumptions, learn to question your perceptions, these little agreements in the mind. Who made the agreement? Who pushed it on you? And why are you willing to carry it around?

One easy way to do this is to turn everything around: If your mental label says x, say, "Well, how about not x?" Try something simple: Suppose there's a sensation in the front of the body—at least it seems to be in the front of the body. Ask yourself, "What if that sensation is actually related to the back of the body? How would you read it then?" Or vice versa. This way you learn how to see how arbitrary a lot of these agreements and perceptions are. Then you're more free to learn how to figure out what counts as a skillful perception, which perceptions get the best results, and then stay with those perceptions. You have the choice.

So much of our suffering comes from our belief that we don't have a choice. A particular sensation comes up, and we immediately label it as a pain. Then it *becomes* a pain, a Big Thing. It becomes solid and grabs on to a certain part of the body. But look at the sensation of that pain. Which parts of the sensation are actually pain sensations and which parts are body sensations? Which parts are breath sensations? Warmth? Coolness? Solidity? When you ask these questions, you begin to realize there are many levels in the same spot, but you don't have to glom them all together. And when you don't glom them all together, then you can focus on whichever level you want to.

It's like tuning in your radio. Right now all the airwaves going through the room right now are going through your body right now, too. There's Rush Limbaugh in there. There's the San Diego classical music station. There's hard rock. There's all kinds of stuff, and you have the choice. You don't have to listen to Rush Limbaugh if you don't want to. Tune into something worthwhile.

The same with the sensations in the body. There are sensations there that—if you focus on them in a certain way and label them in a certain way—are going to get you all worked up. But right next to them are other sensations that you can label in different ways. Learn how to take apart whatever sense of tension or tightness seems to be occupying a part of the body. See that there are other sensations right there in the same spot. Make those your preoccupation. Label those and see what difference it makes.

There's that old statement that an unexamined life is not worth living. Well, an unexamined perception is not worth believing. Learn how to examine your perceptions, try playing around with alternative ones and see how they have an impact on the mind. Then you can choose which ones you want at any particular time.

This is why the Buddha was able to live in a body that went through the cycles of aging, illness, and death but didn't have to suffer: He learned how to label the body and feelings in a different way, learned how to perceive all these processes in a different way. He came up with new agreements in the mind.

So that's an important part of what we're doing right here: seeing how different sensations trigger perceptions but also realizing that perceptions can trigger sensations. And there's a potential for skill in taking advantage of that fact.