

Change Your Perceptions

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When you're focused on the breath, you need a perception to hold you there. The perception can be an image you hold in mind—a visual image, a word, a little sign to remind you that this is where you want to stay. If it's a visual perception, this is where Ajaan Lee's instructions become handy, because remember, when we talk about the breath, we're not talking about the air coming in and out at the nose. It's not the tactile sensation at the nose that we're interested in; we're interested in the breath element in the body, the movement of energy. Without that movement of energy, the air wouldn't come in and out at all.

So where do you feel it? As you breathe in, where's the movement? Where does it feel like energy is coming in, or where does it feel like energy is radiating from inside the body? You have your choice of perceptions. Ajaan Lee also recommends that you think of the breath energy entering at the back of the neck, going down the spine, down the legs; coming in the middle of the chest, going down through the organs, down into the intestines; covering the whole body. And you're free to perceive breath in different parts of the body that Ajaan Lee doesn't mention at all. After all, there's breath energy in the head, breath energy in your tailbone. Sometimes there's a breath energy that feels like it's coming up through the ground and into your body.

Wherever you feel it, whichever way of visualizing helps the energy flow smoothly, brings the body into balance—use that perception. You have the choice.

One of the stranger questions I was asked when I was up in Canada was whether it was true that we can't change our perceptions. What this person had been taught was a pretty fatalistic version of the teaching, which is that whatever you experience in the present moment, that's what you've got to accept, and your perceptions are the way they are based on past actions. So you've got to accept them, too. But if that were the case, there'd be no practice. There'd be no path. You couldn't change course.

The truth of the matter is that you *can* change your perceptions. Think about

dependent co-arising. It starts with ignorance. Now, it's not the case that the factors in dependent co-arising are like billiard balls. In other words, ignorance has an impetus that has an impact on fabrication, and then ignorance is out of the picture as you focus on what fabrication does, when the next factor and what the next factor does, and the next.

Ignorance is there all the time. It sustains the whole process, but ignorance is something that can be changed by knowledge. Learn to look at things in terms of the four noble truths, and you replace the ignorance—at least for that time. That's how the suffering that would have come from the fabrication based on ignorance can stop.

So think of the factors of causation more as sustaining factors. As the Buddha said, we can't find the beginning point for ignorance back in time, but we *can* see what sustains it. It's sustained by the hindrances. So we work to overcome sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty or doubt, to bring the mind into concentration. And we get the mind into concentration by changing our perceptions.

When the mind is in concentration, then you can apply the four noble truths. Ask the questions of the four noble truths: "Where is the suffering right now? What am I doing that's causing the suffering, and how can I stop? How can I abandon that cause?" When you ask those questions, you bring appropriate attention to the breath, because the breath is one of the forms of fabrication that is influenced by ignorance, but it can also be influenced by knowledge. When you fabricate it in knowledge, you're turning it into the path.

So we do have this freedom and we should take advantage of it. You can picture the breath in any way that you find helps you get in touch with how it actually feels right now, and how to take advantage of the potentials it offers for making it more and more comfortable. Think of what you're experiencing not as a given—something that's forced on you by the past. It's a range of possibilities. It's composed of potentials that are here. You can activate the skillful potentials and let the unskillful ones go.

You see this throughout the Buddha's teachings. There's an awful lot of emphasis on the different kinds of fabrication: bodily fabrication—the way you breathe; verbal fabrication—technically, it's directed thought and evaluation, but

in plain terms, it's the way you talk to yourself; and then mental fabrication— perception and feelings. As you look at the Buddha's teachings, you can see that a lot of them have to do with instructions on how to fabricate all these things more skillfully: how to breathe more skillfully, how to talk to yourself more skillfully, how to perceive things in a way that's more helpful.

There's a passage where Ven. Sariputta lists four types of perceptions. He says it's because we don't understand these types of perceptions—in other words, seeing what these perceptions do to us—that we don't gain awakening. But when we *do* see what they do to us, the impact they have, then we can gain awakening. He lists the skillful perceptions, not just as an interesting set of facts, but as possibilities. In other words, you can change your old unskillful perceptions and develop skillful new ones in their place.

The first type of perceptions are the unskillful ones, the ones that he says have a share in decline. In other words, they give rise to more and more defilements— seeing beauty in the human body, seeing constancy in things that are inconstant, seeing ease in things that are stressful, seeing control in areas where you have no control. Those kinds of perceptions get in the way. The perceptions that would aggravate your lust, aggravate your anger: These things all have a share in decline. They're the kind of perceptions you want to avoid. If you find the mind giving rise to them, do your best to change them.

The other three types are all skillful ones. The first ones are those that have a share in stability—the perceptions that allow the mind to settle down into concentration. These all have to do with seeing the drawbacks of the hindrances and figuring out how to get past them. One of the reasons why the Buddha gives so many images, say, of the negative side of sensuality is that the mind is so inclined to see the positive side of sensuality—the thoughts of different pleasures that you'd like to pursue—so it needs strong medicine to see that sensuality is, as he said, like a dog chewing on some bones that have no meat at all. Otherwise, you fantasize about sensual pleasures, but where are the actual pleasures? They're not there. In Ajaan Lee's explanation of that image, he says all the dog gets is the taste of its own saliva. So you could think of your thoughts of sensuality as your mind's saliva coating everything you're thinking about.

There's the image of the bead of honey on the blade of a knife. There's a little

sweetness there, but a lot of danger and pain.

There's the hawk flying off with some meat, and other hawks and crows fly after it. They're trying to tear the meat away from it, and they'll tear the hawk apart if it doesn't let go. In other words, you gain sensual pleasures, and other people get jealous, and they'll do what they can to take them away from you. And they don't care if they kill you in the process.

The message is that if you're looking for your pleasure in sensuality, you're looking in the wrong place. As you hold these images in mind, they help to weaken the hindrances by reminding you that sensuality isn't as attractive as you usually perceive it to be. But at the same time, to keep the mind in concentration, you're going to need some perceptions that help stabilize your concentration. This is where Ajaan Lee's images of the breath flowing through the body are so useful.

Or take the image in the Canon of the bathman kneading water through that ball of bath dough: In the same way, once there's a sense of pleasure with the breath, you try to knead that pleasure through the body. Wherever there's a pattern tension in the body, you allow it to relax. You can make a survey of the different joints, starting with the joints of the fingers, going up to the wrists, elbows, shoulders, then down to the joints in the toes, up through the feet, the ankles, the knees, and up the legs through the spine: Wherever there's a connection between one bone and another, think of the muscles around those bones relaxing. You'll find the breath energy flows more smoothly through the body.

Then there are the perceptions that have a share in distinction. These are the ones that get you into deeper states of concentration. We develop a sense that the breath energy is not so much coming in from the outside, it's actually radiating from within the body itself, and if you notice any blockage that gets in the way of that breath energy radiating out through the entire body, think of it dissolving away. Hold that perception in mind.

Or you can think of all the cells in the body breathing together—breathing in together, breathing out together. In other words, there's no one center from which the breath originates. It originates from every cell in the body. Those perceptions are really useful in allowing the in-and-out breath to calm down. You have sense of fullness that makes you realize that you don't need to pull things in

from outside. This allows the breath to grow still and minimizes the fear that you're going to feel if the breath doesn't come in, go out, that you're going to die. You realize the breath is already there in the body, and as long as it's full—every cell feels full, every point in the body where you have any sensation at all, feels full—you can settle right in, and there's no sense that you're lacking anything, even as the breath grows perfectly still.

And finally, there are the perceptions that have a share in penetration—the penetration that allows you to see through to the deathless. These are the classic perceptions having to do with inconstancy, stress, and not-self. First, you apply them to anything that would pull you off the path. You apply them to anything that would discourage you from being generous, that would discourage you from holding the precepts. You're realizing that whatever reward that you would get from being stingy or being unvirtuous is not going to last, and then you're left with the karma. That perception allows you to see the distractions or the temptations that would pull you away from the path as really not worth it. When you're practicing concentration, you apply the perceptions of to anything that would distract you from staying centered on your object.

When outside distractions fall away, and concentration has become firm, then you look at the distraction of concentration itself, seeing that it, too, has drawbacks. Even your insights have their drawbacks. You can latch on to an insight, and ego can develop around it, pride can develop around it, so you have to learn how to look even at your insights as inconstant, stressful, and not-self. That's how you get beyond them. This is where these three classic perceptions—inconstancy, stress, and not-self—have to be let go, too.

So when you realize that these different grades of perception—that they have these different impacts on the mind, and that you have the choice as to what kind of perceptions you're going to use—that frees you up. It's what makes the path possible.

There's so much fatalism in the way that the Dhamma is taught in the West—saying that you simply have to accept whatever comes up. Part of this may be traced back to the commentaries when they talk about dependent co-arising as having to span three lifetimes. Your ignorance in this lifetime will then cause birth in another lifetime, and then the craving and clinging in that lifetime will cause

another birth in a third lifetime, at which point you experience the suffering coming from the ignorance two lifetimes ago, but that's crazy. The ignorance in one lifetime gives its fruit two lifetimes later? Or if you have craving in this lifetime, what, you wait for the suffering to happen in the next lifetime? That's not how the Buddha taught causality.

It's all happening right now. Causality has enough of a pattern so that you can understand it and work can with it. The potentials for the present may come from past kamma, but because these potentials don't get actualized until you contribute your present-moment karma—what you intend in the present moment, what you fabricate in the present moment—that gives you some freedom in how you're choose to fashion things. Whether you're going to choose to fashion a path or not a path, whether you're going to use the perceptions that make you hold on to the path, or the perceptions that allow you to let go of the path when the time comes: It's because all this is actualized right here, right now, through our intentions right now—that's why we can get free.

So the past does have its influences. If it didn't have any influences at all, the path wouldn't be possible, either. The fact that it does have its influences allows you to learn how to build on the skillful ones, or convert the less skillful ones into something more skillful. It's like being a good cook. You may not have control over the produce coming into your kitchen, but you can learn the skills to make good food from whatever there is.

So always keep that possibility in mind. This is a skill that we master, and mastering a skill requires some freedom of choice. You always have the possibility of choosing the most skillful course of action. Your mind can make a difference because it can change. There's that passage where the Buddha says that the thing that's quickest to reverse itself is the mind. That fact can be negative if you're already on the positive path and you suddenly switch direction, going back to a negative one, but if you find yourself on a negative path, you have every right to switch around and go back to the positive path.

We have a strange tendency that, when we're thinking unskillful thoughts, we feel that we're committed to them, and that we have to see them through, but we're not so committed to the path. See your commitment the other way around. If unskillful things come into the mind, and you find yourself following them, you

can stop at any time. The simple decision to stop is meritorious right there. But when you're on a skillful path, have a sense of commitment. You've been working so hard throughout these many lifetimes to get onto this path, so don't throw that good karma away.

So we do have choices, and the choices do make a difference—which is why the four noble truths are possible, why all the Buddha's teachings are possible. It's why he taught. So always hold those possibilities in mind.