

Foundations of Zen 13

Forms of Meditation Class 2

Relating with Self: Perception

As we begin to talk about meditation using perception, we need to talk about the role of language in perceiving. The clearest work I've read on this subject is Dale Wright, in his book *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*. This is a bit of a long quote, and a little bit academic, so please bear with me, because I found it so surprising, and I think it is important:

p.71

Even before we get around to describing experience, language is already there as the form or forms that the experience has taken....Language is already embedded in the content of our experience. [This understanding of language does not make a distinction between] primary experience and a subsequent interpretation that we piece together and then place upon the raw data of experience. Language and perception "co-arise." Although theoretically separable, they are indistinguishable in experience itself. How so?we always understand what we perceive immediately as whatever it appears to be. Awareness of what it is that we perceive is linguistically structured, and comes to us directly in the perception itself. We perceive "this" directly as what it is—a book, a sound, a strange situation. These linguistically constituted images arise in the perception itself rather than subsequently. We can test this in our own experience. Try to find a perception that is not already associated with some language in the initial encounter. It is true that we do perceive some things incorrectly, and that subsequently we alter the language through which that perception is understood...But both "perceptions," both "correct" and "incorrect" come to us in the form of language. Language doesn't guarantee accuracy; it just guarantees that all of our perceptions will be understood within the given context of language.

It is also true that we sometimes perceive some things in uncertainty, in sheer perplexity. We don't know how to understand them initially even though we have definitely perceived them. yet language is already there, setting even this perception in context. We have perceived this state of affairs as perplexing, as uncertain, as mysterious, even if that is all we initially perceive in it....

P. 72. Language, and its entire history of involvement in thought and practice, functions to set up a context of significance in which perception occurs. By means of language, the world (the given) is focused and organized in advance of every encounter with entities, persons, or situations....Assigning it a linguistic form is not something we do after seeing it. It is the very

shape that seeing has already taken. Although this language refers to something extralinguistic—something beyond language—that something appears to us as the reality that it is through language...Language, therefore, is not to be located only at the level of concept and predication. It is also present at the level of perception in such a way that perception, language, and thinking are all interdependent.

Meditation with Perception

So let's talk about Meditation with perception as a way of self-knowing and in relation to others. There is no such thing as naked perception, as Dale Wright points out. Instead, what we observe is how rapidly our perceptions arise and are named, labeled, and incorporated into our ongoing narration of self. Most of the time this is occurring without our even being aware of it. Meditation with perception opens our awareness and makes this process visible, at least some of the time. The meditation focus, candle, flower, stone, shell, mandala, sounds, and so on, provides a kind of "home base" we return to over and over again when we notice we have lost that focus, are drifting in our stories. There's no judgment associated with this process, simply a willingness to return, maybe thousands of times in a sitting period. Until gradually our mind begins to rest in the present moment experience without too much agitation, dullness, or clinging, without any notion of "I" or "me" doing it. There is just hearing, seeing, feeling. This means our situation is relational; we are enmeshed with the whole world. Can you separate the sound from the hearing or the hearer? Only through language is this possible.

Is the sound inside, or outside, or somehow in between? In traditional Buddhist teachings, "hearing" has these aspects: a sense organ (the ear and its associated nerves, brain centers, etc.), an external stimulus (a sound), and a "sense consciousness," (the faculty of hearing), which is a product of the contact between the first two. Each sense has a particular sense organ, external form, and specific sense consciousness. The mind is considered a sense organ also, making its own contact with the world, and with its own sense consciousness of thoughts, emotions, ideas, plans, theories, expectations, and so on.

The advantages of using a sensory concentration in meditation is that it can only be experienced in present moment experience, and when you drift off in thoughts or stories, it is a concrete, specific place to return to. It cannot be controlled or manipulated.

Further, our senses are an intimate encounter—the interface between ourselves and our world. They reveal our relationship both internally and externally to what is.

Activity-Sense Perception: Practice with mindfulness of hearing.

- 1. Sit upright, and become mindful. Take a deep breath: Close your eyes and for the next few minutes, attend solely to your sense of hearing and the sounds that

arise in it. Begin with the sounds of your own body: your breathing, your heartbeat, whatever you can discern... Then allow your awareness to expand to sounds in your room, in the house: a refrigerator or washing machine running, a dog sighing in sleep... Allow your awareness to expand further, to the space outdoors, a yard, a parking lot, a neighborhood: lawn mower down the street, two neighbors talking in front, kids on bicycles, laughing... And then your awareness expands much further, as far as you can hear sounds: an airplane nearly five miles above you, a nearby highway, the burble of a stream... How far beyond your body can you hear?... Rest in that spaciousness... Now return your awareness of sound to this room, my voice, your breathing. What did you observe? [discuss] Now we will take this just a tiny step further in part 2.

- 2. With a partner: one partner speaks for one minute. The listener attends to the pace, tone of voice, inflections, pauses, the music of the speaking without getting caught up in the content. Then switch partners and the listener becomes the new speaker for one minute. Talk together for a few minutes about what you noticed. What was your experience as the speaker? What was your experience as the listener? [Discuss with whole group]

Hearing when with another is quite different from listening. When we listen with only half our attention, perhaps with the other half thinking about our response, planning dinner, looking at our phone, we are barely hearing anything. In relational practice we allow ourselves to rest in simply hearing the other or others, without any other intention or distraction. The experience of being heard in this way is profoundly nourishing, and it is profoundly nourishing to hear another in this way. You can do small experiments in mindfulness of hearing when you are in a conversation as well as when you are sitting in meditation. See what you can discover.

Activity with another. In pairs: the painter's eye

Object contemplation: a candle flame, a flower, a stick of incense, a pebble, a leaf, or a shell. One form of object contemplation is to draw a simple object, very, very slowly, tracing its contours precisely, as if traveling over its surface. This should take at least 20 minutes if you are going slowly enough. The purpose is not to draw an artistic likeness of the object, but simply to engage in this activity of perception. Our eyes are quick to scan things, and our mind is quick to name them; this exercise slows our perception down and steps beyond language in an embodied practice.

Visual contemplation: the Mandala.

Mandalas are complex images rich with meanings and intended as objects for meditation and reflection. They are generally stupefying at first, filled with layers, geometric forms, ornate

patterns, baffling figures: animals, people, supernatural beings, and writhing with activity. Our minds at first try to make sense of it logically, but we cannot; mandalas are maps of whole universes, internal and external. As they draw us in, we can only allow the images to wash over us. Like koans, they resist our interpretations and explanations, insist on being met directly. We name and label: a pig, a man, a circle, a level, until we wear out our grasping for meaning. Even the many explanations of the design of a mandala cannot ultimately satisfy us: how does it help us to know that this circle represents the 12-fold chain of dependent origination? While these complex images are the opposite of the simplicity of a candle flame, a flower, or a stone, we soon discover the same exhaustion of our cognitive energies in the practice of simply attending. Mandalas are not the work of solitary artists, but the product of collective imagination and, usually, production. Monks working on a sand mandala gather around the perimeter, maneuvering their tiny funnels filled with colored sands to create the fine lines, precise patterns and images together. As we engage with the mandala, we are drawn into this extraordinary visualization of the Buddha and the long lineage of teachers and teachings, the collective imagination of the sangha, unfolding over thousands of years, and the embodied immediacy of our presence with it. Ultimately we are compelled to surrender our conceptions and logical reasoning to simply rest in wonder.

I will put some handouts on the class web page with images and descriptions for the Kalachakra mandala, and instructions for making mandalas of your own, if you like. The very process of creating a mandala is itself a meditative activity.

I hope you will explore this concentration practice of sensory perception, which can be grounding when we are scattered or agitated. It returns our awareness to our embodied presence, and provides the experience of finding our home in the world. Having a focus for meditation is helpful especially when beginning a meditation practice, whether in the early months or years of practice, the first few minutes of zazen, or the first period of an intensive. It is also helpful when we are suffering from pain or distress. Awareness of our sensory experience is awareness of our aliveness in the world. It is a complement to our open awareness practice, which we will discuss towards the end of the course. Most of all, it can be helpful in our relationships with others, keeping us in the present moment of relating by anchoring our awareness in our senses. What are we actually seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, thinking? In this way we can be fully present for ourselves, and for others.