Perception and Papañca

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 53:56

Last week, Guy explored the topic of the five aggregates—these five areas of experience. Heaps of stuff, I think he called them. The teachings highlight these five aspects of experience as places where we tend to get caught, places where we tend to cling and create a sense of self. And so they're worth exploring in some depth. It can be useful to get to know these processes in our experience, to begin to recognize how they work and to see how the clinging and craving and selfing manifests around these areas.

Earlier this week, Sally talked about vedana, the process of feeling and the experience of feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—and the way we get caught around that through craving and clinging. Vedana is one of the five aggregates, but it's also found in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, so she explored it from that perspective.

Tonight I'd like to pick another of the five aggregates to highlight: the topic of perception, the process of recognizing what's happening in our experience.

On the surface of it, this seems like a really simple process—this aspect of experience of recognizing something, knowing something's happening, and then recognizing it from the past. It's almost like a process that goes into our memory banks and retrieves: this shape, this form, oh that's that thing. Or this sound, that's that thing. It's this process by which we recognize experience.

So it seems like a fairly simple part of our experience. And yet the suttas point to ways that not understanding this simple aspect of experience leads to so much suffering—not only in our own lives but also in the world. The suttas point to misunderstanding around this process of perception as one of the sources for conflict. So it's very useful to begin to get familiar with this process and begin to see: how does this confusion happen? What goes on?

Perception is this very simple function of mind that, based on sense contact, takes that contact and then identifies it. It's a very natural function of mind that happens in every moment of experience. And so we meet our experience, and the process of perception—though it sounds simple at the beginning—is actually a layered process.

Initially we may meet our experience through the sense of sight, the bare kind of sight. The mind recognizes shape and color, form and color. And then from that form and color, the mind begins to make sense of the objects. So the mind might first recognize flat and brown, looking at the back of the room, and then recognize that's a wall. It's got this layered nature to it. Recognizing round and brown, and then recognizing it as bell. This all happens so fast that we don't have to think about it.

It's a very useful function of our mind to do this recognition. If we had to, every time we walked into a room, figure out what people were and what zafus were and what floors and walls were, it would exhaust us. The brain power, the amount of mental energy it would take to do that every single time—I think it would exhaust us. And so this function of perception, I almost think of as an energy-saving device. It helps us to move more quickly through the world.

We can actually start to see this process at work in this simple way as we explore, as the mindfulness gets more continuous. On one retreat I remember I was sitting on the porch and I just turned my head, and my eye landed on this patch of nature on the side. And I watched the experience being categorized and figured out. There was green. And then there was the recognition of jagged. And then the mind recognized it as leaf. In three discrete steps: green, jagged, leaf. I watched that happen in the mind. I wasn't trying to see it. And so again, it's the continuity of mindfulness that can start to reveal the subtler processes at work in the mind.

Sometimes we can also see this process at work when the mind isn't quite sure of what something is. If the light is dim or you're looking at a distance at something, you can sometimes see the mind trying on various perceptions for what you're looking at. At one point I walked into a room, the sitting area at a retreat center. I think it was a two-week retreat I was on, and it was pretty quiet. The light was pretty dim in the room.

As I walked into the room, there was this form, a large form across the room. The very first thing my mind did was identify it as a deformed being. And my mind then said, no, it's not a deformed being. But it took a while. It kept looking at it, looking at it. And finally it recognized it as a vase of flowers.

So you can begin to see this process at work at times if the mind isn't quite recognizing what's happening. I saw this happen the other day. I was walking down the road with Greg and we were looking into the distance. There was a lump on the road and my mind went, dead animal. We talked about it. He said, "It's pretty big. It's probably not a squirrel." And I thought, porcupine—I had seen a porcupine. But when we got up to it, it was a clot of dirt.

Again, the mind will make these attributions. Perception is very prone to making mistakes. And herein lies some of the issue with perception.

This process of perception is a very normal, very natural function of mind, but it can get us into trouble. It can take us out into delusion, into confusion, when we don't understand it—when we don't understand the process of perception.

Each of the five aggregates that Guy described has an analogy that the texts associate with it. The Buddha was a master of analogies. It's really quite amazing, the evocative power these analogies have. In the case of the aggregates, the commentaries say that the analogies used for each aggregate point to the ways in which we get confused or deluded by that particular process.

For the aggregate of perception, the analogy is that it is like a mirage. I actually looked up what mirages are because I think often we use the word casually to mean a hallucination—somebody's seeing a mirage, they're seeing a hallucination. But what mirages actually are—and I'm sure the Buddha was aware of this—is something like the classic mirage in a desert of seeing a lake. What's actually happening there is that the desert and the air and whatever moisture there is or isn't in the air is acting like a reflector. What you're seeing when you see a lake on the desert is the reflection of the sky on the ground.

So a mirage is a reflection of something that is there, but it's misconceived or misconstrued as being something other than what it is. And this aspect of perception is a place where we tend to get caught. We take in experience, we meet experience, we perceive something. We perceive a dead porcupine on the road and we respond to that image or that perception. The perception is a reflection of what's out there, but it's not what's out there. It's a reflection in our minds. And so often what happens is we respond to the reflection thinking it's reality or truth.

Very often we relate to our experience through perception as being an accurate representation of reality. But perception very easily gets distorted, it very easily makes a mistake. It's often also distorted by interpretation. And so if we don't understand perception, this is a major area where delusion enters into our experience. We believe our perceptions to be accurate representations of reality.

Now, perceptions are very useful. It's not that we're trying to stop perception—we couldn't do that anyway. Perception is said to be one of the seven universal concomitants for every moment of consciousness, seven universal factors that arise in every moment of consciousness, and perception is said to be one of those. So we're not going to stop perception. But we can learn to understand it as perception and learn not to be fooled into believing our perceptions are truth. They are our perceptions.

The first place to begin to explore is simply whether we can start to recognize this process at work. It's possible to recognize this process with the mindfulness getting stronger. I wouldn't say this is something to try to do. What I'm going to describe in terms of the ways I've experienced this—generally, these experiences have come because I've been available. Well, not just that I've been available, but that I've heard people talk about this process, I've heard it described, and then, in being available for my experience, I can begin to see it.

And that's part of the function of this kind of talk. It's not to tell you, "go find this in your experience," but the description of it may unlock a little possibility in your mind, and then it might be possible for you to see it. So it's not something to do. It's more of a description of something that might be experienced.

For me, the place that has been the most easy or natural to recognize this process of perception is in the avenue of hearing. When I'm sitting with my eyes closed in meditation, there are all kinds of sounds arising. There's the pings of the radiator, the sounds of cars on the road, sounds of construction, birds, coughs and sneezes—all of those things. There's the sound that hits the ear, and then the mind identifies it. It happens so fast. We hardly even think about it. We hardly even think that it's a process. It's just, "Oh,

we've heard a sneeze." That's what we think—we've heard a sneeze or we've heard a car. But actually, we've heard the vibration, and the mind has recognized it, interpreted it, categorized it as sneeze or as car.

And it does this often, at least in my experience, through thought, a form of thought. So I'll be sitting in meditation and I'll hear the car and the mind will go, "Car." A thought, "car," will appear. Or maybe I'm sitting there hearing, and there's the sound of the drill out on the roof, and my mind will create an image of a person on the roof with a drill. This is perception at work—this creation of an identification or recognition of what's happening.

So it's easiest for me—one of the easiest avenues for seeing it is with sound. I think partly because the avenue for recognition for many of us comes through image or often through words in the mind. And so there's a distinction or a contrast in a way. We recognize something, the sound arises, and then we might hear our mind say the word: car, or truck, or drill, or radiator. This is perception. And this is this process.

Some of you have talked about recognizing this—recognizing this mind that's identifying or naming experience. So this naming is one way that perception works. It's one kind of perception. Perception is actually responsible for many ways we recognize experience. Just a simple identification of objects through naming them is one way, one form of perception. Perception also creates space, location, direction, time.

One example of this around space and location: I was meditating in Hawaii for six weeks earlier this year. Birds rule in Hawaii. There are so many birds there. And for days, actually, sometimes there would be hours on end where the only sounds I heard were the sounds of the birds. There wasn't much else. So there are all of these bird sounds, and I began to recognize that the sense of space was created with the hearing. I would hear a sound and the mind would create an idea—ah, that sound is over there, in that location, in that direction. So it created this three-dimensional experience through the recognition of sound. Sometimes I've had the experience of, when hearing a sound, it's almost like my mind moves out into space, up in the air somewhere, in the direction of where that sound was. That's perception creating that sense of distance and location.

I would say the easiest way to recognize perception is through this naming, but I just wanted to put out there that it also is responsible for these other forms of recognizing various aspects of our experience. Perception is what allows us to walk up the stairs without falling over—the distance and height of a step.

So we can begin to see this identification as a process. When it's not recognized, this identification of a perception—often, again, as I said, it can come as a thought. This name perception can come as a thought.

And so close to thought, if we don't notice this, if we don't see the mind recognizing "sound, car," we may start thinking about cars. We may start thinking about where that car is going.

So many times, sitting in this hall, I have heard the sound of a car driving down Pleasant Street. My mind would create an image of the car driving down Pleasant Street. When I saw that, I could just recognize it

as seeing, as an image, as the process of perception recognizing that sound. When I didn't recognize it, the likelihood would be that there was the perception, the recognition of it as car, and then the image of the car driving down Pleasant Street, and then there's the notion of what's down at the end of Pleasant Street? Oh, that's Barry. What's in Barry? Oh, there's that... I won't say what's down in Barry.

So the mind can quickly move from perception to thinking to getting lost. I would say this is one of the main avenues through which our mind wanders. We do not recognize that perception has happened, and the mind slips out into thinking about it. As Guy mentioned the other day, also with perception there are often emotional associations that come along. And this is another avenue from which we can get lost. As a perception arises, if it comes with emotional overtones and those emotions aren't recognized as coming with the perception, we can slip out into the emotions.

Perceptions very naturally impact our experience. How we perceive our experience has a huge impact on how we respond to it. This is highlighted sometimes when we misperceive something. A classic analogy about this is misperceiving a rope as a snake. Walk into a room with dim light, a coiled form in the corner, and the mind might misperceive that as a snake and become frightened. As soon as the mind recognizes it's not a snake but a rope, the fear vanishes. So we see that how we perceive, what we're perceiving, can have an emotional impact on us as well.

I had a really clear example of this that unfolded over several days in Burma. Each evening when I was meditating, I was hearing a sound—a kind of high-pitched squealing sound. And my mind identified this high-pitched squealing sound as a pig. The monasteries often are very close to villages, and this was pretty close to the wall of the monastery. In Bagan, I was always hearing sounds from the village coming over the wall—from loudspeakers or whatever else noise there was. The noise of the village was around. And so the sound of a pig squealing, I interpreted as a pig in the village.

But the sound had a kind of—what I interpreted, and I recognize this as an interpretation—a distressed quality to it. And I began to create this notion that these pigs I was hearing each evening squealing were being slaughtered by the butcher for the next day's sale. And so compassion was arising in me regularly each time I would hear this sound. Now I knew that this was an idea in my mind, but still it was compelling to me. The sound sounded so distressed—the pig squealing sounded so distressed—that the response was this feeling of compassion.

So this went on for some days, maybe even weeks, of hearing the sound and feeling this compassion when I heard the squealing. And then one evening, instead of sitting in my room at that time of day, I was out walking. And I saw these bats flying in the air. And they were squealing, these bats. That was what I had been hearing.

It had not crossed my mind at all. It had not at all crossed my mind the possibility that I had not been hearing pigs. It was a complete misperception. And of course the compassion vanished. There's no need for compassion when there are no pigs being slaughtered.

So the mind created the perception. The mind responded to that perception. And the mind believed it. The whole thing was believed. This is often how perception works in our minds. It's easier to see when perception makes a mistake how our responses are to something constructed in our mind. It became fairly easy to recognize at that point—oh my gosh, that whole thing, that whole notion that it was a pig, that it was a pig being slaughtered, the compassion—it was all a construct of the mind. It was fairly easy to see that when perception made a mistake.

It's harder to see that we are responding to our perceptions and not to what's actually out there with all of the perceptions that we're having. We so easily take our perceptions to be reality. So little examples like this, where perception makes a mistake, can begin to highlight and show us how we are attributing reality to our perceptions.

So the teachings in the suttas connect this process of perception particularly closely with a deluding or deceiving influence in the mind—that process of *papañca*. The texts don't really give a clear definition of papañca, but they describe its function, they describe how it works in the mind. There's one particular sutta that goes through how perception leads to this process of papañca, and then feeds back in a cycle.

Here's the process at work. This first part simply describes how perception functions. Dependent on the eye and forms—and this is repeated, of course, with all six sense bases—dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. So this is simple: something, sight, the eye—they meet and there's the knowing of it. The meeting of the three is contact. So there's this contact of the experience. With contact as condition there is feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. What one feels, that one perceives. So we have this contact, there's a feeling and a perception. These two can occur pretty close together—the contact, the feeling, the perceiving. What one perceives, that one thinks about. So this is like recognizing it as a car and then thinking about the car going down Pleasant Street. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates.

That is one translation for this word papañca: mental proliferation. One way this might be understood is the mind starting to run riot. We experience something, we perceive it, we start to think about it, and then the mind goes crazy with thought.

We see this happen in sitting a lot. We may experience a little twinge in the knee or somewhere in the body and then feel that. There's the unpleasant feeling of it. There's the recognition of it as an unpleasant experience in the knee, maybe a sharp pain. And then the mind starts thinking about it. What's happening? I've been sitting. I've been sitting now for four weeks and the knee is starting to bother me and oh my goodness, four weeks of sitting like this may create a crippled leg. I'm not going to be able to walk again. Things like this—I know you all know what I'm talking about. We go from a twinge in our knee to cancer in seconds. This is one way that the mind moves from a recognition to the mind proliferating, spreading, running riot. The mind runs amok.

Then the description continues: with what one has mentally proliferated, perceptions and notions tinged

by mental proliferation beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye. That's what the texts say—it's a little complicated. I'll read it again and then give you a sense of how I understand this. With what one has mentally proliferated, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable by the eye.

So we have some idea—pain equals crippled leg—something like that. And then that idea of crippled leg gets overlaid on our experience of the pain. Every time we are experiencing that pain, it's coming through that lens of "crippled, oh no, oh no," and aversion just mushrooms.

Here's another example of how this works. Suppose you're walking down the street and you see somebody—that's often a kind of neutral experience, just seeing a person walking down the street. But in this case, perhaps this person has an appearance that reminds you of someone who has harmed you in some way in the past. You may recognize consciously that it's not the same person, but at the same time, that notion of having been harmed by somebody with a similar appearance can come into the experience and create a feeling of fear with that perception. This kind of thing happens to us a lot. Our past comes into our present through the workings of our mind, through the workings of papañca, and distorts our perception of the present moment. One person actually translates this term papañca as "distorted perception."

So this distortion of perception, this papañca, is one of the ways that delusion begins to enter in, connected with perception. This definition of papañca as mental proliferation—this is how Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it in the texts—is sometimes described as a mind full of thinking or the mind that runs riot with thought. The Pali itself for the term papañca means something like "spreading," and so there could be some justification for this translation.

And yet I've grown interested in this term because there are various places in the texts that speak of freedom from Papanca in a way that suggests something far more fundamental—a deeper freedom than simply not having the mind thinking all kinds of thoughts.

In one sutta, for instance, the text describes the goal of this practice through perhaps eight different qualities: the goal of this practice is for one who is free from delusion; the goal of this practice is for one who is free from clinging; the goal of this practice is for one who is free from Papanca. It includes that among the most essential freedoms. To me, this implies something deeper than simply attaining quietude in the mind through concentration. That kind of mental stillness is not yet the freedom being pointed to.

So I've been curious about this term and have done some exploration, reading various perspectives on it. Thanissaro Bhikkhu has been particularly instrumental in my reflection here. He explains how the term was used in early India to refer to the elaboration of a theme in art. In music, for example, you might pick up on a theme—several notes repeated in different ways at different times—and your mind hooks onto that theme. An emotional resonance develops. The term Papanca referred to this creation of a theme for the evocation of a response.

So the term in our minds may also refer to something along these lines: the creation of a theme, the creation of an idea, the creation of an object even. We take things in with perception. If we return to the sutta—what one perceives, that one thinks about; what one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates, or creates ideas about, or creates concepts around. We take things in with perception and then we create an idea about that. We believe that idea. And with that belief, we overlay it on our experience and view everything through that belief.

This may be what is meant by Papanca: the creation of a theme, the creation of an object. We take in experience, we perceive it, and our minds turn it into an object. This is a person, this is a wall, this is a floor, this is a dead porcupine in the road. The mind, through perception, creates the idea of an object and then believes that object to be reality.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu actually uses the term "objectification" to translate Papanca—the creation of objects and the believing of that creation. Rather than understanding that what's happening is a process in our own minds, that we're relating to a perception, we relate to what we have perceived as being something true, something real.

Another possible definition might be "reification." I appreciate this term. The definition of reification is the error of treating as a concrete thing something which is not concrete but merely an idea. This is exactly what happens with perception in our usual way of relating. We don't recognize that we are relating to perception. We take it to be relating to something real, something concrete.

This becomes more poignant when we reflect on how the suttas teach that this process of Papanca—of distorted perception—is intimately connected with conflict and suffering in the world. Our beliefs, our taking in information and believing our perceptions to be reality, create the conditions for people with different perceptions to hold different views of reality and to meet in conflict there.

If you recall the story of the blind people and the elephant from a couple of weeks ago, this is precisely that dynamic. People bringing in a perception and creating a reality from that perception: an elephant is like a post, an elephant is like a hose—and then coming to blows over it. This is Papanca at work. That process of believing our perceptions to be some kind of reality.

In our culture, the notion of race has been responsible for so much conflict and suffering. There is very good scientific evidence that race as a biological phenomenon is non-existent. It is a construct of mind. There is nothing real about it. And yet the power of the delusion, the mind believing its reality, creates very real suffering in this world.

We cannot, I think as a culture, afford to dismiss this with "Oh, it's just an illusion." We really need to look at how we are perceiving things and recognize them as just processes, just perceptions—and to recognize when they are being believed in ways that create suffering in the world.

There's a very powerful film I watched a couple of years ago whose title encapsulates this notion: *Race:*

The Power of an Illusion. The title itself speaks to the illusory nature of race and how much suffering it has created in the world—the power of our beliefs.

One scholar, Professor Padmasiri De Silva, says that the process of distorted perception—his translation for papañca—the process of placing every bare perception into a framework of emotions and beliefs that have come out of our past, our history, our conditioning, robs the freshness out of our experience. But we are not aware of this constant interference of the past. Because of this unawareness, which is our ignorance and our delusion, we see humanity fragmented as "me and others," "us and them," and in various stereotypes—skin color, ethnicity, language, ideology included.

This process of papañca is said in the texts to have its root in the thought "I am." This creation of a sense of identity, a sense of self. And what does that do? The creation of a sense of "I am" creates a subject, but a subject doesn't exist without an object. And so the creation of "I am" creates "us and them," "me and that." This process of papañca is in this area—this creation of separation in the world.

Through this exploration of perception, of seeing just how the examples of misperception really give us the sense of how mental creation has a huge impact on how we navigate the world, how we feel about the world. This exploration begins to point us to what Guy was pointing to this morning in the guided meditation: every experience is appearance. It's all appearances, all reflections. We reify it into something solid rather than knowing it as appearances. When we can know experience as appearance, wisdom can help us not make mistakes—not make the mistake of taking something to be real that is simply an appearance.

It's kind of mind-blowing when we start to feel into this and recognize this. Everything we experience is a creation of our minds. There is nothing that we experience that is not a creation of our minds. I happen to be of the belief that there are things out there. I think you're all out there. I don't think I'm sitting here giving a dharma talk in my mind with no one out there listening to it. But my experience is mediated through the mind. All that I can know of experience is mediated through the mind. Everything we experience is appearance.

It doesn't mean that we don't engage skillfully, or that we have free rein to do whatever we want. But we begin to recognize that we misunderstand appearances as reality. And therein lies a lot of our suffering and a lot of suffering in the world.

Suffering is created by clinging in the mind. The clinging itself is a pattern in the mind, that holding on. But what we actually want, what we're clinging to, is also nothing more than something created by the mind. Seeing this is quite freeing—when we recognize that all of it, the suffering, the clinging, what we are clinging to, is all created by the mind. In that recognition, the mind begins to understand it doesn't need to do that process. It doesn't have to create that suffering.

When we actually witness this process at work, the mind begins to learn. It gains the wisdom that allows it

to let go—allows it to let go of those processes that create the suffering in our minds and allow it to ripple out into the world and impact other people as well.

We can't stop perception. We don't even want to try to stop perception. But what is helpful is to begin to recognize perception as a process. To recognize that this is a creation of mind, that what I'm responding to is a creation of mind. If we really understand this, the mind loses its traction for clinging.

I find this to be a very interesting exploration and experience, and yet it's not something—as I said earlier—to try to do. Just observe. Just watch your experience. Simplicity, simplicity of just observing. The processes can begin to become apparent. We begin to recognize experience as just appearance through the meeting. There's just a simple meeting of our experience. We don't have to believe this. We don't have to try to do it. We don't have to try to find it. Just keep observing in a very simple way.

Let's just sit for a moment.

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