Perception and Papañca

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Tonight I'd like to explore with you the topic of perception.

Some of you might remember this is one of the five aggregates, the process by which we recognize experience. Tonight I'd like to spend quite a bit of time looking at just this aspect of the aggregates, just this one process.

On the surface it might seem that it's a pretty simple process, just a simple recognition of experience. We see something and we recognize it. We see a chair, we know it's a chair. We see a cushion, we know it's a cushion. We see the wall, we know it's a wall. It's the process by which we recognize experience, and so on the surface of it, it seems perhaps kind of simple.

And yet the suttas, the teachings of the Buddha, point to not understanding this process as being one of the key reasons, one of the leading causes for suffering, for stress, for struggle, for conflict in our world. When we don't understand perception properly—when it's infused with confusion and delusion—it can lead to a lot of problems, struggles in our lives, and conflict in the world. Perhaps it bears some reflection and exploration. We'll spend some time this evening looking at perception itself: what it is, how it works, how we might be able to recognize it in our experience, and then ways that this process gets tied up with delusion—ways that we get caught by this process and it leads us to struggle, to suffer.

A little bit of recap about perception, since both Bhante and I talked about it when we each discussed the aggregates, but I'll just review what perception is. Basically, there's a kind of meeting or contact of experience with the eye, with the ear, with the nose, with the tongue, with the skin, with our minds. In that contact, there is the mind trying to recognize what the experience is. What is that sight? What is that sound? What is that smell? What is that taste? What is that contact? It's a natural function of the mind.

As I said in my talk last time, and I think Bhante also pointed out, this is a really useful process, this recognition. The way we wander through our day requires perception. It requires us to be able to recognize things. If we had to figure out every time we walked into a room that these are people and this is the floor and this is the wall and I shouldn't walk through a wall—if we had to figure all of that out every time, we'd be exhausted. This perceptual process is a very useful mechanism of our minds to help save energy. It's a kind of shortcut. From the time we're born, we're taking in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch, categorizing, classifying, and organizing all of that information into concepts, into perceptions. It's a very useful process.

It's also a layered process. If we explore how our senses work, we can do this with a little bit of reflection.

You can also see this in your practice as your mindfulness gets a little bit more continuous; I've occasionally seen this in my own practice.

The first thing that our senses meet is the raw sense data. Sight, for instance—the first thing that sight meets is form and color. That's what our eyes register: form and color. From there, the mind begins to recognize that particular shape of form and color is a chair, that particular shape of form and color is a person. It's like there's a layered process. This bell, for instance—there's the shape and the color of the bell, and your mind is perceiving that as well as what you know it to be: the bell. Our minds don't have to consciously go through these layers every time we meet a bell. We just see it and immediately it's bell. Immediately we know.

We can start to see this process at work. At one point on retreat I was sitting outside in California, and something caught my eye. I turned my head and my eye fell on a shape and a color, and the mind kind of named or noted what it saw. The mind first saw green, then it saw jagged, and then it recognized it as leaf. This layered process.

As I said the other day, often the perceptual process is about recognizing the objects themselves—recognizing this is a bell, that's a leaf, this is a flower. This is one aspect of perception: the identification of objects out of our field of experience. Sometimes in our practice, when the mindfulness is a little more continuous and perhaps when the situation or the environment is a little obscured—if the lights are dim, for instance—you might see as you walk into a room your mind trying to figure out what's in that room and where it is in the room.

On one retreat, I walked into a dim room at night with just a tiny bit of light around the edges, and there was this shape on a table. I watched my mind trying to figure out what it was. It came up with some very bizarre things. One of the first things it proposed was that it was a deformed being. I recognized pretty quickly that this was probably not the case. But the mind tried on a couple of possibilities before it actually recognized that it was a vase of flowers.

Sometimes we can watch our minds doing this—trying on various perceptions until it feels like it's found something that matches the situation, meets the conditions, meets what is here. We can think of our perceptual process as matching our experience against our history.

Perception not only includes this naming of experience—although this is the main aspect I'll explore and I think is one of the easiest to see, this recognition of experience. Perception also includes the recognition of space and location. The distance that I perceive in this room is a perception. When we look at the room and see that there appears to be space there, I'm not saying that there isn't space there, but the fact that we recognize it as that space is a function of perception.

This is perhaps a little easier to understand around hearing. When we experience sound, what's happening physically is that sound waves are hitting the eardrum. That's all that's going on. And the mind,

through repeatedly having experienced sound waves hitting the eardrum, understands and basically creates the understanding of where that sound is located in space. That too is a function of perception.

When we walk upstairs, the distance that we step, the amount that we move our foot—it works because perception is working. The perception of distance and space, our seeing of that. There are many aspects to perception. Perception is our friend. We get through the world, we navigate the world because of perception.

The process of perception can get us into trouble when we don't understand that it is a process. We easily misunderstand and get caught by the process of perception, basically mistaking what we are perceiving as being the reality of the world.

For each of the aggregates, as Bhante mentioned last night, the Buddha offered an analogy. I'll only discuss the analogy for perception tonight, but the analogy related to each aggregate is said to point to the way that particular aggregate can confuse us—how it catches us off guard or leads us to misattribute something. The analogy for perception is that perception is like a mirage.

I actually looked up mirages a couple of years ago when I was reviewing this talk, and I discovered that a mirage is not completely something made up in the mind. The real definition of a mirage is that it's based on the way light gets refracted. If you're in the desert, for instance, the heat coming off the sand refracts the light in such a way that it creates a mirror effect—you see the sky reflected on the sand, so it looks like a lake.

A mirage is not a complete concoction of somebody dying of thirst, but actually a perception of something. It's a seeing of something that's reflected—the sky is there, but it's reflected on the ground. And the deluding nature of the analogy pointed to here is that we can easily confuse it for being something that it's not.

Perception functions in this way: we're taking something in. At least in my view, there is stuff out there. You are out there. I believe you're out there. You're not just a construction of my mind while I sit here giving a talk to myself. I actually think you're out there. And yet my experience of you is a construction in the mind. I can't actually experience you directly. I experience you through the perception in the mind. So it's like a reflection. Perception is like a reflection.

The way we can get caught or misunderstand the process is that we take that reflection to be the actual reality. With our experience of things coming through, moderated through our mind, there's a very large doorway through which opinions, views, and interpretations can enter—if we aren't aware that perception is a reflection of experience and not reality itself. This is a big piece of the deluding nature of perception.

That we interpret or view our perceptions as being reality, and in that process often drag in a lot of views and opinions. So that representation in our minds of what's happening out there is very often distorted by

interpretation. If we can become aware of this process, there is a possibility that we may become aware that the interpretation is distorting our seeing. From this, you might begin to get a sense of why the Buddha says that not understanding perception leads to suffering and conflict in the world.

So let's start with recognizing perception itself. I did talk about this a little bit the other day, but I'll go into it again just to remind you. We can recognize this activity of perception: there is an experience, and then the mind recognizing the experience. In the naming kind of perception—which is the main one I'll talk about tonight—the identification of objects, this kind of perception often happens through language or through images. I would say it happens through our avenues of thought. Perception is often recognized as a very subtle level of thought.

The easiest place to recognize this, at least for me, is in the terrain of hearing. We hear something. The other day I heard the sound of geese. There was the sound, and immediately what my mind did—I was inside, I couldn't look up and see them—but in my mind I saw an image of geese flying in a V formation. That's perception. That recognition, the mind recognizing, "that's what that sound is." Sometimes it might come through a word in the mind. The mind could have simply said, "geese." Just saying the word in the mind. You'll see this; you can watch this happening in your meditative experience.

Because perception is so close to thinking—it's a subtle kind of thought—that simple recognition of "car" or "geese" or "itch," there's that recognition and it's recognized with some kind of thought, often. It's very easy, if we don't recognize perception happening, to move from the perception to thinking about what we've perceived. So we might go from hearing the geese, if we didn't recognize the perception of it, to thinking about times we've seen geese in our past. Memories might emerge. For me, actually, the other day, the memory of my brother when he was little, so proud having killed his first goose. That brought some emotional response, that memory.

So the perception leads to thinking, leads to emotional responses. This is a very normal process, and I'm not saying we should stop it. But we can recognize that it's happening and conditioned on the perception. It's important to recognize that we respond to our perceptions, that in experiencing something—like, for instance, the geese—there is potentially an emotional resonance with what we think we have perceived.

The deluding power of this becomes clearer when perception makes a mistake. And perception is very prone to mistake; I have to warn you about that one too. Perception can so easily make mistakes. We see something and misattribute it—like my mind saying, "Oh, it's a deformed being." That's a far-out one, but our minds do misattribute, misperceive, make mistakes in that recognition.

The classic example offered in the commentaries is walking into a dark room and seeing a coiled form in a corner and perceiving it as a snake. With that perception, fear may arise. Then somebody turns the light on and we see that coiled form is a rope. The fear disappears. The fear was conditioned on the perception of it being a snake. So again we can see how our perceptions of experience, and particularly when they are misattributed, can influence our experience.

The clearest example I had of this—I've told this story quite a few times, so some of you have probably heard this one before—the clearest example for me of this kind of mistake and the emotional response that happens is that there was a period of time I was meditating in Burma, and my room was pretty near the monastery wall. Lots of sounds came over the monastery wall. If any of you have practiced in Burma, you know that Burma is nowhere near as quiet as Barre, Massachusetts.

And so there were sounds. At one point, for three days, Burmese opera was playing nonstop, twenty-four hours a day. That was pretty intense.

But pretty much every evening during a particular stretch of the retreat, at the same time each night, I began hearing a squealing sound. Hearing that squealing sound, my mind perceived it—it heard the sound, and the identification it made was "pig." I had heard pigs squealing before, and this sounded like a squealing pig. So my mind perceived it as pig.

My mind didn't quite stop there. It went a little further, and I could actually see that the rest of what I'm going to describe to you was the mind constructing. Because I knew I didn't know this. But my mind had a sense that this pig was in distress, and it created the idea that what was happening each evening was that I was pretty near, in my place in the monastery, to a butchery just in the village. And what I was hearing every evening was the nightly slaughter of a pig. So compassion arose for this distressed pig. This went on night after night—feeling this, noticing this, hearing the pig.

And then one night, instead of sitting at that particular time of day, I decided to do a walking meditation. While I was walking, I began to be startled by these swooping forms that were coming very close to me. The swooping forms, I figured, must be bats. I mean, I hadn't really spent much time with bats, but that was the perception I had for those creatures. And those forms were squealing. It was bats that were squealing every night. There wasn't even a pig in the picture. The pig didn't exist. The compassion, of course, just completely vanished.

But again, we see particularly how prone to mistake perception can be. I did not question the perception. I knew that the whole story about the slaughtering of pigs was probably an idea in my mind. It didn't—it still generated this feeling of compassion. But I knew that part was a projection. The idea that I had misperceived entirely didn't cross my mind until I noticed these bats squealing. So the mental perception created conditions for our response. This kind of thing happens all the time.

And this takes us to this more deluding aspect of perception. The teachings connect this process of perception with another process in the mind called papañca. The suttas don't really describe or define what papañca is, but they give a pretty clear description of how it arises and what happens when it arises. And so it's pretty clear that it's really tightly connected with delusion—that papañca and delusion go hand in hand.

The other piece that the suttas say about papañca is that it's intimately connected with conflict in the

world. Essentially, the suttas have a kind of step-by-step unfolding of why conflict arises, and it's traced back to papañca. Papañca as the root of conflict in the world. So it's a pretty important process to understand, to get to know. And it's intimately connected with delusion in our minds.

There's a description of how papañca comes up. I'm going to read this to you. This is a fairly famous quote from the suttas, so many of you may have heard it. This section goes through all six sense bases with respect to this process. It's a description of the process of how we go from contact with a sense door to papañca being created, and then what that papañca results in. It goes through it for all six sense doors. I'm just going to read it with respect to the eye.

"Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact." So the meeting of the eye, the form—the visible form that is seen—so the eye, the form, then there's eye consciousness.

The meeting of those three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. What one feels, that one perceives. So there's the contact, there's a feeling, and then there's the perception, the recognition of what it is. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one—I'm just going to put in "papañcizes" here—that one papañcas about.

It's translated in a couple of different ways. One of the ways it's translated is "mental proliferation." So this passage really clearly describes that process I was talking about. We hear a sound, we perceive it—I hear the sound of the pig, or the sound of the squealing—perceive it as pig, and then start thinking about it and mentally proliferating about it.

It's not just thinking. The thinking is kind of more at the bare level. It's like, "Oh, that's a pig. Wonder what kind of situation that pig is in. Sounds distressed." This is where it heads into papañca. "Sounds distressed. Maybe it's being slaughtered. Oh, there's a butcher shop over there. They're killing pigs every night." So this is a simple definition of papañca—the mind kind of running riot with thought. One of the most common ways that people talk about papañca is mental proliferation of thought.

The sutta goes on. This is then a description of how papañca impacts our subsequent perceptions. It says, "With what one has mentally proliferated"—this is complicated language, I'll unpack it for you—with what one has papañcized about, with what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye.

So basically this is talking about a process by which we see something, we experience it, we think about it, we start creating opinions, views, ideas about it. And then our experience is not like bare experience coming in. We are seeing that experience through those opinions, ideas, beliefs—through that papañca. Papañca becomes a kind of filter over our experience, leading us to perceive things differently.

Another example: you might be seeing somebody walk across the street. That might just be a very neutral kind of seeing—seeing a person. But perhaps in this case, this person has a body shape, height, or form that's similar to someone who has caused you harm in the past. And so there potentially becomes a reaction. The sight of that person reminds you of—in classical language, in standard language—the sight reminds you of someone, and that reminding drags in a whole bunch of history. And so seeing that person is now no longer so neutral. There could be a whole bunch of emotional response that's arisen from that simple contact based on—I'll read this again—based on papañca as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by that papañca beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye.

So again you start to see how, when perception is not understood, delusion and perception begin to lead us around by the nose. Our past comes into our present through this process.

That exploration of papañca, the exploration of mental proliferation, is one way to understand papañca. But there's some other thoughts about the meaning of papañca based on how it's used in the suttas, the various places it's used in the texts, and how it is used.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu actually points out that the word papañca is used in Indian art to mean a repetition of a theme that gets represented by a certain object. It might be in art—a repetition of a theme based on a visual object that's repeated throughout a series of paintings or multiple times in a painting. He also says that in music, again, papañca is described as perhaps a series of notes that become repeated throughout a piece of music. And so it becomes kind of like a little object. Thanissaro actually translates papañca as "objectification," and I'll go into that a little bit more in just a bit.

I'm particularly interested in this term because of how it's connected with other terms. In certain places in the suttas, the Buddha actually points to the allaying of papañca as being very important for full liberation.

He talks about, for instance, in one sutta the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion—one cannot be freed without those. The absence of craving, one cannot be freed without that. And the absence of papañca, one cannot be freed without that. So in one list he placed it among the things that need to be released, understood.

To me, this actually indicates that papañca means something more than a lot of thinking. It has a deeper meaning, perhaps, than just the mind thinking about things repeatedly. And so I'd like to explore that a little bit—what else it might possibly point to, what other deluding aspect of experience it might illuminate.

To do that, I'm going to tell a story. Let's start with a story from the suttas. This is a teaching story that came about because a couple of his monks were wandering on alms round and they were hearing some other ascetics arguing. Those other ascetics were arguing, "The Dhamma is like this, it's not like this,

you're wrong, I'm right, it's not like that." They were all entrenched in their positions. When his monks came back, he told them this story.

He said, "Formerly, bhikkhus"—and this is an abbreviated version of the story, so it won't take too long—"Formerly, bhikkhus, there was a certain king in this very Sāvatthī, and that king addressed a man. 'Come now, my good man, bring together all those persons in Sāvatthī who have been blind from birth.' 'Yes, your majesty.' 'Now, my man, show them an elephant.' To some of the blind people he presented the head of the elephant saying, 'This is an elephant.' To some he presented an ear of the elephant saying, 'This is an elephant.' To some he presented a tusk, the trunk, the body, the foot, the hindquarters, the tail, the tuft at the end of the tail saying, 'This is the elephant.'

"Then the king approached these people and said, 'Have you been shown the elephant?' 'Yes, your majesty.' 'Tell me, what is an elephant like?' Those people who had been shown the ear of the elephant replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is like a winnowing basket.' Those who'd been shown the body replied, 'An elephant is like a storeroom.' Those who'd been shown the foot replied, 'An elephant is like a post.' And so on, saying, 'An elephant is like this, an elephant is not like that.' They fought each other with their fists."

So the story points to the way we perceive our experience. In this case, the people who were blind from birth, who'd never seen an elephant in their lives, were given a particular aspect of the elephant to feel. That's perception, right? They experienced the elephant with their own experience, their own hands. They weren't given the full picture. And yet from that perception—perception from direct experience, very strong—views got formed. Strong ideas about "this is an elephant."

For the person who was shown the leg, it's not incorrect to say this part of the elephant is like a post. But the view that gets created—and often this happens around perception—a view gets created that grows larger than the actual perception. We take things in with perception, we create an idea about that, we believe that idea, and then we block out other information, other ideas, and say, "It's like this. It's like this." We believe our ideas.

We do this actually a lot. This is not an uncommon experience for us—to create an idea and then hold to it. "It's like this. It's like this."

To take it out of the realm of a teaching story and into the realm of our world: there's the concept of race, for instance. The concept of race is well known, well understood to have no basis in biology whatsoever. No basis in DNA, none. The concept of race is completely a construction of mistaken perception.

And yet, that concept has been one of the most—has created some of the most horrible suffering this planet has seen. Because of beliefs in the concept of race, beliefs about the ideas of what various races are. Even though the idea of race is a complete myth, the reality lingers, continues to this day. The reality of oppression, the reality of suffering because of a concept. It's not just about people and stories coming to

blows over an elephant. It's well worth getting to know, familiarizing ourselves with these processes of mind to understand how this works.

So in that story, we take a perception and create a thing out of it. This may be what is meant by papañca. Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro uses the word objectification. The people touching the foot of the elephant, the leg of the elephant, create the concept "like a post." That becomes the reference point for elephant at that point. So we go from a perception to a thought to a belief. I think where the believing part enters may be some of what papañca is about—essentially, the process by which we conceptualize something and then take it to be reality. I started out by saying that's how perception is deluding, going back to that image of the mirage. We mistake the reflection for a reality. This is the deluding nature of perception, and where I think papañca fits in.

So Ṭhānissaro uses this term objectification—the creation of an object out of experience, out of a process. There's another term that I like, the definition of which is perfect for this. It's a philosophical term called reification. Some of you may have heard of this term. I wrote down the Wikipedia definition of reification this evening: "Reification is the error of treating as a concrete thing something which is not concrete but merely an idea." This is what happens all the time with us through perception. We relate to our experience through the concepts, taking them to be the reality.

One scholar, a Sri Lankan scholar, says: "This process of distorted perception, 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 experiences. But we are not aware of the 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 other stereotypes—skin color, ethnicity, language, and ideology included."

This is happening all the time. And so we can, through this exploration of perception, begin to see how everything that we experience is created and experienced through the mind. It's easier to see this with the world of thoughts—fairly easy. I remember at one point I had broken up with a partner and had gotten over that partner long ago. Yet at one point I was walking down the street, and my mind came out of this thought bubble which had created the world of being back in relationship with that person. We were going somewhere and doing something, and then pop—the bubble burst. It was a little bit confusing. Where did that come from? At that point the emotional attachment had long since released, and so there wasn't any feeling of "oh, poor me, I'm not in that relationship anymore." It was just seeing the delusion of the mind having created a reality for a minute—that relationship was existent again.

We can see this way in which we live through our thoughts, the creation of thought worlds, thought bubbles that we live in. It's a little harder to see that everything we experience—every sight, every sound, every smell, every taste, every touch—is mediated by the mind. What we experience through sight, for example, is just little pixelated bits of light and color, and it's our mind that puts together the images.

There was an example of this in California where I live. There's a science museum—it's mostly for kids, but it's fun for adults too. I took my ten-year-old nephew there at one point. It's called the Exploratorium. We walked in, and back in the back of the hall there's a big giant open warehouse, basically. Hanging on the ceiling, back in the back of the room, were long rods—probably about five or six feet long, maybe two or three inches around. Each rod, there were probably ten to fifteen of them, hanging about two feet apart.

And on each rod, there were flashing colored lights. I looked up at that and thought, huh, I wonder what that is. I'll have to check that out later.

My nephew and I wandered around the Exploratorium and stopped at one point to get something to eat and rest. He was sitting there eating his ice cream cone or whatever, kind of looking up, and he said, "Look, it's butterflies!" I looked in the direction he was looking, and he was looking at these rods. I looked up and said, "What are you talking about?" Then he said, "Oh, now it's a school bus!" I looked up and saw a lot of yellow flashing lights and a little red flashing light, and I said, "What are you talking about? I see yellow flashing lights. It's kind of the color of a school bus, but I do not see a school bus up there."

It took me quite a while, actually. We went off to do something else, but then we came back and I said, okay, I am going to see what on earth he is talking about. I stood there for a while and watched. At some point—it's kind of like Carol mentioned the other day, this trick of those 3D pictures where you have to look just in the right way to see dinosaurs pop out of the page—well, this is a similar thing. You have to look at it just in the right way. I think it involves a bit of a tracking technique.

What happened as I looked at it was that the entire area delimited by those bars became a screen. It genuinely looked like there was a projector, a screen that something was being projected on. And on that screen, I saw a school bus riding across. The perception was so detailed that I could read the name of the school district on the side of the school bus.

My understanding of how this works is that the flashing lights were timed just right, and there's a kind of persistence of vision that carried—in imagination, because it clearly was not happening out there. That was what was so amazing about this exhibit. It clearly was not happening out there. That school bus was in the mind. The persistence of vision put all those little bits of light together to create the image of the school bus.

This is another area where delusion can creep in. Because the concepts—that was really clear, that school bus did not exist anywhere. It wasn't even a projection of a school bus; it was completely in the mind. And yet the mind creates the object. It creates the solidity of a thing. This too, I think, is in the terrain of papañca—the creation, the solidification, the objectification of experience.

All experience is mediated through the mind. Clinging, of course, is a mental experience. I think you're probably all really familiar with that one by now—the experience of clinging. That's a mental formation, a

present arising in the mind that has no inherent reality in the world. And not only that, but what we cling to is a construction of our own minds. What we are clinging to is created by our own minds. Mostly we cling to concepts. We cling to ideas. There's no way to cling to reality.

And so this doorway of perception and concept is very fertile ground for clinging. When not seen clearly, when perception is not seen for what it is, we create that object and we cling to it. Our perceptual process has been co-opted. Perception has been taken over by delusion to make us believe that there's something actually to cling to. But what we're clinging to is a formation of the mind, an idea in the mind.

When our minds start to see this, when our minds get it, begin to get that the mind is contributing to its own suffering—fortunately our minds don't particularly want to suffer. As our minds get the information about how suffering is created, they begin to recognize: well, that's not necessary. That can be let go of.

But it's not something we can necessarily just act to do. The mind has to see things clearly. And perception happens all the time.

We have abundant opportunity to watch this process. Yet it is not necessarily something to try to do. I believe I mentioned this last time—Sayadaw U Tejaniya often says this isn't something to do, but rather information that may help you see something new in your experience. Just observe. Very simple.

These processes can become apparent through the simplicity of meeting experience. And the ways that we are confused and deluded will also begin to be revealed. The mind will choose to let go when it understands.

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