Perception and Papañca (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:00:20

It really is a privilege to have this opportunity to share the Dharma with you, to share in your unfolding of your practice.

Looking out at you, we're all here together. This is such a rare thing—that you would choose to do this, that eighty-some people come for this long to watch your minds. And I can share that happiness with you. There's not so many people that would understand why watching your mind is so good. So, thank you.

Last time I sat here in the evening, I offered a sharing on dependent origination. That teaching talks about conditioning—the conditioning of how our minds habitually are caught in the process that leads to suffering. The Buddha pointed to this process in different ways, offering different framings of how understanding conditioning can be useful for us in understanding our minds.

I'd like to explore one of those tonight too. It's also a process that talks about how we get caught by delusion. In the middle of this chain is a quality, a process of mind: the process of perception.

Perception is a natural functioning of mind. It's the process by which we recognize our experience. And yet when we don't understand it as a functioning of mind, when we don't understand it as something that's happening in our minds, it's very easy for delusion to come in and create a lot of misunderstanding. So I'll talk first a little bit about perception—how it works and how we might begin to explore it—and then about how it gets misunderstood and how confused this world becomes through that misunderstanding.

This process of perception is very simple in our minds. It's a natural process that helps us to navigate the world. I sit here and I look out and I see people, walls, tankas, lights, chairs, zafus, zabutons, candles, statues. All of that is the mind recognizing experience. This process of recognizing our experience is incredibly useful to us.

When we were first born, we didn't have much of this capacity to distinguish all of these things and have names for them. It's something we've learned. We've learned to give names to things, and this is a piece of the process of perception. Perception is actually broader than just naming things, broader than recognizing things through our language capacity, but this is one of the main ways I'll speak about it tonight.

It's very useful for us. If every time I came into a room like this I had to figure out, "Oh, those are people. Oh, those are lights. Oh, that's a wall—okay, don't walk into that"—if every time I walked into a new space all of that had to be figured out, it would be exhausting. We can think of perception, in some ways, as a shortcut that really helps us to navigate our lives.

In the Buddhist teaching, this process of perception is understood to be connected with memory. We begin to recognize experience because we've been taught: this is a person, this is a chair, this is a light. When we enter a space, our mind does a kind of search. It asks, "What is this?" and searches for the closest pattern match: "Oh, it must be that." Our minds do a really good job of this—a really, really good job.

As we go through the world, we contact the world through our senses, through our physical senses and the mind. Our eye sees sight, and there's that contact, and then from that contact there is this process of recognition that starts to happen. Shape and form. The eye sees color and form, and then the mind puts together what that color and form is.

Likewise with sound, smell, taste, touch—there's a kind of bare sense contact. When we bite into an orange, there's tartness and sweetness and the texture on the tongue of liquidity, and all of that together is understood as "orange" pretty quickly. And also because we've seen the orange. The senses play together to support perception.

But what's actually happening at the level of the sense door is different: bitterness, sweet, salty, sour at the tongue level; form and color at the eye.

And it's the mind that puts together what we recognize. We recognize it based on memory. Perception is a process that's very useful, and yet it is easily misinterpreted.

The Buddha offers a teaching by way of analogy that helps us recognize part of the way that perception can be misunderstood. He uses the analogy that perception is like a mirage.

Our usual understanding of a mirage is seeing something that's not there. But what a mirage actually is—and I'm pretty sure at the time of the Buddha they understood this—is something a bit different. The classic mirage is seeing water in a desert. What's happening there, apparently, is that with the heat rising from the sand, it creates a kind of reflective surface. And that reflection is basically reflecting the sky, so it looks like water. It's reflecting the sky, and it's also reflecting other things. I saw a picture—you can take pictures of mirages, which is very cool. There was a picture of a desert with mountains in the distance, and it looked like a body of water in front of those mountains, where the mountains were reflected in what looked like water, much as they would be if it were actual water.

So the reflection is happening because of the heat rising from the sand, and it's reflecting something that's there—it's reflecting the sky, reflecting the mountains. Because of our association with seeing that kind of reflection, that it means water, our minds perceive it to be water. It's reflecting something that's there, but it's not the thing.

This begins to point to the confusion that can happen around perception. When we perceive experience, all that we experience is our mind's reflection of it. Perception is like a reflection in the mind of the world. Our experience doesn't actually meet the world—it meets the perception. Perception is one of the bare bones of our experience. And because that perception is created by the mind, it's really easy for it to be

distorted by views, beliefs, and interpretations, to be misunderstood for something that it's not.

This analogy points to the way our delusion takes that representation of reality to be reality. And we believe it is reality. It's really hard not to look out and see you and think I'm really seeing you. I know that all I know is constructed in the mind, but it's very difficult to recognize that. It's not just like a camera recording things here. It's not just like a microphone picking up sounds. We talked about this some the other night—how our views and ideas create a filter through which we see things. This also creates filters through which we perceive. We're not simply perceiving reality, and yet we think we are. This is a key place where delusion can enter into our mental processes.

It can be very helpful to explore perception, to begin to get familiar with this process. And we can. We can get familiar with perception at work as mindfulness gets stronger. We can begin to see that this is happening, that there's a difference between the contact with the sense door and how our mind recognizes something about it.

For me, in my own practice, the easiest place to do this has been in the terrain of sound, of hearing. As we listen, as we hear, there's that sound coming from outside that by now we all recognize as froggies. That's Greg's perception: froggies. But we can begin to notice, as mindfulness gets strengthened, that there's the sound, which is pitch and tone, and then there's something that goes on in the mind. It might be the word "frog" that comes up. Or it might be an image—if you've seen the frogs, it might be an image of a frog. I actually have not seen images of these frogs; I have no idea what they look like. But I've created something, a frog-like thing in my mind, and that's how it was perceived. Rather than my mind saying the word "frog," it created an image of a frog.

And so perception involves the hearing and then the identification of what is heard. That identification can happen as a form of thought—it's like a really rudimentary form of thought. And because it's a form of thought, it can happen like any other thought. It might come in as a visual image, it might come in as a word. I've even sometimes seen a perception as if I was reading the word: "Frog." So that's another way that perception can happen, or thoughts can happen—as if we're reading the sentences.

Sometimes thoughts can happen as a kind of kinesthetic sense. I used to be a dancer, and at times if I thought about my dance, I could feel it as if I was doing the dance. I didn't think about it in terms of words. I didn't think about it in terms of "this step and then that step." It was the feeling of doing it that was the thought. Thoughts can occur in many different ways.

For some people, maybe the perception of "frog" is connected to touching a frog. They touched a frog at one point and maybe that's what comes in. So this perceptual process, this rudimentary form of thought, can come in many different ways.

Sometimes, if it comes as a word, there's hearing something and then the mind labels: "golf cart" or "sneeze" or "rustling" or "chair squeaking." Your mind might recognize, perceive the sounds and name

them. It can almost seem like labeling—if you've done any of the noting, the mental noting. Sometimes it can seem like this perceptual process, when we start to see it, is almost like labeling run amok.

But one thing I often say when I talk to people, if they say, "I just feel like I'm labeling everything"—I ask, "Well, is it something you're doing? Are you consciously trying to label 'frog' and 'chair'? Or is it just happening?" And many times people will say, "No, it's just happening. I'm not doing it."

Perception is not self. Perception is something that happens. It's a process that unfolds in our minds. And as I said before, it's a really useful process. It helps us navigate, helps us walk down the hill, helps us navigate our lives, helps us go through the lunch line, sit down and eat our food—this process of perception at work.

So we can begin to get curious about this process. And for me, as I said, hearing is one of the easiest ways to do it. When you're sitting in meditation, you may notice the sounds and then notice the mind identify them. That's perception at work. Noticing that identification, you can recognize, "Oh, perception. Perception's happening."

I would say that not recognizing perception happening is one of the leading causes of wandering mind. Because we're sitting here and we hear the turkey. And if we don't clearly notice that the mind has perceived "turkey," we may start thinking about turkey. And then start wondering how many of them there are out there. And then start thinking about that one we saw all by itself, running so fast—we've never seen a turkey run that fast. Oh, sitting.

So not noticing perception, very often, because it's so close to thinking—it's very easy if we don't notice that, or when we don't notice that, for it to slip into thinking.

Perception also affects other aspects of our experience. It's not the perception itself that has the impact, really, but it's all the associations that come with that perception that can affect us.

One day in meditation I was hearing this sound, and the mind flipped back and forth in terms of perception. This can be an interesting thing to notice. Sometimes if we don't quite know what something is, we can see our mind trying on different perceptions.

Oh, maybe it's that. Oh, maybe it's that. Well, in this case, what I was flipping between was thinking it was a bird or thinking it was a machine that was beeping. For a little while it would be, "Oh, it's a bird." Then, "No, it's too regular. Oh, it must be a machine." Then, "No, it sounds like a bird." This kind of flipping back and forth—I was never able to find out whether it was a bird or a machine. But one of the interesting things was that I could see there was a different impact it had on me when I thought it was a bird. "Oh, bird"—pleasant. "Oh, beeping machine"—unpleasant. The feeling tone of the experience was affected by the perception.

This happens a lot. The classic example of how perception affects us can really be highlighted when we do

have a misperception—like that situation where I don't even know if it was a bird or a machine. Maybe it was something else entirely. But the classic example is walking into a room in dim light and seeing a coiled form in the corner and perceiving it to be a snake. That, of course, would create some emotional responses based on associations with snakes. And if somebody comes in and flips the light switch on and we see it's actually a rope, there's a very different response.

Another aspect of perception that I'll just mention, because at this point in the retreat this could be happening: our minds try to perceive whatever is going on. Whatever experience is happening—whatever sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or whatever's arising in the mind—the process of perception tries to recognize it, tries to identify it in some way. And as we enter into unfamiliar states of meditation, our mind will still try to recognize them.

Sometimes our mind will attempt to recognize the experience—at least in my sense of what's happening. I don't really know what's going on, but I do have times when I'm experiencing something that maybe feels broad, vast, expansive, and an image comes into the mind like seeing the night sky or seeing an expanse of grass. Just the vastness of the mind—it's like the mind creates a perception of it through analogy. And so you might notice this at times. You might notice that sometimes while you're meditating, coming into or touching unfamiliar states of mind, the mind trying to make sense of that experience may perceive it, recognize it through an image that's kind of like an analogy.

At one point I was experiencing quite a bit of low energy, and the mind recognized the mind state with the thought, "The batteries are low." This was evocative of what the state was. So I just wanted to put that out there.

The texts—the Buddha, the teachings in the Pali Canon—offer teachings around perception that point to how it is tied up with deluding influences when we're not aware of what's happening. The analogy that I mentioned around the mirage is one of those teachings pointing to the deluding influence of perception.

There's a particular quality in the mind, a function of the mind, that has a very delusive capacity: the process of papañca. Some of the teachings on perception tie this teaching to papañca, pointing to a connection between perception and papañca when the mind is not clear. The texts don't really give a clear definition of papañca, but they do describe how it arises and a little bit about what happens to the mind when it arises. They also tie it to conflict in our world—they point to papañca being very intimately connected with conflict. This process of papañca.

So I'm going to read you a passage, or part of a passage, about papañca and perception. This is one little piece of it. In this passage it goes through each of the six sense bases and points to how perception works in the sense base and then how papañca leads forward. I'll just read this with respect to the eye and forms, but it is also repeated six times: with the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile objects, and the mind and mind objects.

So this is just one way through this process: "Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises." This has a flavor very much like dependent origination, because it is conditions coming together that lead on to the next thing. Dependent on the eye and forms—forms being light striking the eye, bouncing off of objects in the world—eye consciousness arises. So basically that's seeing. "The meeting of the three—the meeting of the eye, forms, and eye consciousness—is contact." Something becomes seen. "With contact as condition, there is feeling"—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. "What one feels, that one perceives."

And so this adds in another piece that wasn't clearly called out in dependent origination. The understanding in the commentaries is that feeling and perception arise together. Feeling arises, perception arises right with it. We both feel it and perceive it at the same time.

What one perceives, that one thinks about. So we hear something—there is a feeling associated with that and a perception of turkey. And then there's a little bit of thinking about it. It's not just the bare perception. Maybe the perception was an image of turkey, and then we start: "Oh, that's a turkey. I wonder how many there are." There's just a thought about it.

What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. This is the word for *papañca* that's translated here as "mental proliferation." In some ways, this mental proliferation has been talked about, and is still often talked about, in terms of proliferation of thought—that kind of description I gave before of, "Oh, I wonder how many turkeys there are. Maybe... hmm, I wonder about that one that got separated before." The mind just kind of goes off into thought. This is one understanding of what *papañca* is: the mind that's kind of run amok in thought, basically loss of mindfulness through lots of thinking. This is a very common way for perception to function in a mind that is not very mindful—we perceive something, we look at it, we recognize it, we think about it, and then we start thinking about how it relates to other things we've thought about and other views that we have, and we're off.

The rest of the section goes a little bit further into what happens to a mind that has *papañca*-ed: "With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye."

This is, to me, a description of how when we think about something a lot, views are created, opinions are created, and then those views and opinions—which are born of this kind of mental proliferation—influence us, affect us. This is very much the same cycle that we saw in dependent origination, with ignorance conditioning mental formations and conditioning what we take in to consciousness. Here it's perception leading to views and opinions and ideas, and those views and opinions and ideas then affect how we take in information.

So that perception of... the sound, the beeping sound. If it's just beeping, maybe it's neutral. Maybe the first thing that hits the ear is just neutral—just the sound, beeping. And then the mind has another layer of perception. The first level of perception is kind of "beeping," and then there's another level of perception that happens, which is "bird" or "machine." That extra level of perception then influences the feeling.

This kind of influence happens a lot in our lives. For instance, seeing somebody that you don't know walking on the street—just seeing a person walking by—maybe that would be a relatively neutral perception, much of the time. And yet, what can happen is if that person has, perhaps, a body shape that's similar to someone who has abused you, that connection of perceiving somebody with that body type leads to associations with being abused. That kind of connection may lead you to, in that moment, experience fear when seeing this person that you don't know.

In this way, the past comes into our present. Our conditioning—not only our views and ideas, but what has happened to us, how we've engaged in the world, what the conditions of our life have been—those conditions will affect how we take in information, how we perceive something.

I got interested in this word *papañca* partly because other translators translated it differently than Bhikkhu Bodhi. The translation I read here was from Bhikkhu Bodhi. I think Thanissaro Bhikkhu uses a translation where *papañca* means "objectification." Other teachers also point to the fact that this word means something more than just a lot of thinking.

Because there are other places in the texts where this word appears—where it says freedom is for one without papañca. It's tied very closely to a mind that is free from papañca, a mind that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion. It's liberated.

Reading that text, I thought, this has got to be much deeper, much more profound than simply a lot of thought. Because you can have a mind free from thought, just very concentrated, and not be terribly free. And so I got a little curious about this and began to explore what it might mean if it does mean something more like objectification.

There's a teaching story that might help us understand something about this getting tied up around perception. It's actually in the Pali Canon, this teaching story—the story of the blind people and the elephant. Many of you have probably heard this story, so I'll just briefly recap it.

In a long-ago kingdom, the king asked his elephant trainer to bring an elephant and to gather the blind people who were in the village and show them the elephant. The elephant trainer did this, brought the elephant and the blind people together, and the king said, "Show the people the elephant." Some of the people were shown the leg—they touched the leg. Some touched the tail. Some touched the ear. Some touched the side of the elephant.

When the king then asked each one, "Tell me, what is an elephant? What is an elephant like?" each one had a different answer. Those who touched the legs said, "An elephant is like a post." Those who touched the tail said, "An elephant is like a broom." The ear—"It's like a winnowing basket." The side of the elephant—"It's like the wall of a storeroom." They each had different perceptions, naturally, very naturally had different perceptions of the elephant.

Where the story gets tied into our exploration of papañca is this: in the story, hearing each other describe,

"Oh, an elephant's like this," they got into fights about it. They said, "No, you're wrong! I know from my direct experience—an elephant is like a post. It's not like a winnowing basket. You're wrong! An elephant is like this. An elephant is not like that." And they came to blows over this.

This happens in our world, basically. What's happening here is that the people are taking their perception to be the elephant. It's not just that they're saying, "Well, this is what I experienced. Huh, you experienced something else? That's interesting. Wow." There's a kind of reification—"This is what I experienced, and this is truth. This is the elephant." Coming back to our analogy, it's taking something to be real that's just based on experience, that's just the experience.

There are places in the teachings where the teachings point to this process of papañca leading to ideology, quarrels, war. This, he says, is the root of conflict.

So this process of perception—if we look at it a little more closely—this process of papañca, when we perceive something, one of the first things that happens, perhaps, is that the mind takes it to be reality. At a very basic level, we believe our perceptions to be what's out there, rather than understanding that the perception is a construction of the mind. Possibly this process of papañca has to do with this process of mind that creates the concept associated with the perception and takes that concept to be real, believes that conceptualization to be real.

We can't live without perception and concepts.

They have to happen. But what part of the process is problematic is not recognizing that it's a process, that it's a construction of our minds. We believe it's reality. We believe it's truth. And from that, divisions happen in our culture. Divisions happen in ideologies.

So if we look at this paragraph, I'm going to read it again using "objectifies." See if it has a slightly different flavor for you.

Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one objectifies. With what one has objectified as the source, perceptions and notions born of objectification beset one with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye.

So this process—"with what one has objectified as the source"—this is a thing. Views, opinions, ideas about that thing come into the mind. And based on those views, opinions, and ideas, we take in the rest of our world.

One thing I find interesting about objectification, this word objectification, is that you don't have an object without having a subject. This is another piece of the equation here with papañca. If the mind is objectifying something, creating it as a thing, it's simultaneously creating an "I" separate from that thing.

The root of papañca in one text is said to be the thought "I am."

So this creation of subject and object happening in this moment—when we're not noticing perception as perception, not noticing the creation of concept as the creation of concept—this is the medicine for us: that we can recognize it, and in recognizing it, not be caught by this objectification.

One scholar, a Pali scholar, Professor Pali Hawadana, says this process of distorted perception—because that's what happens, papañca distorts perception—this 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're not aware of this constant interference of the past. Because of this unawareness, which is our ignorance or our delusion, we see humanity fragmented as me and others. Us and them. And in various other stereotypes—skin color, ethnicity, language, ideology included.

And so this misunderstanding around perception leads to a great deal of suffering externally.

I think I have time for this. At the time of the Buddha, there were two Brahmins arguing with each other about what makes a true Brahmin. One said, "What makes a true Brahmin is the lineage of pure birth." The other said, "I think what makes a true Brahmin is how they are in the world, how they respond to the world." And tellingly, in this particular story it says that the one Brahmin could not convince the other Brahmin of his view, and the other Brahmin could not convince the first of his view. Sound familiar? This kind of cementing of our opinions, our views, based on our beliefs.

So they decided to go ask the Buddha, "What do you think about this? About what makes a Brahmin?"

And the Buddha starts by saying, "Well, let me tell you. I'll teach you, as they really are, the divisions of beings in the world. For there are many kinds of birth. Know first the grass and trees; though they lack self-awareness, their birth is their distinctive mark, for there are many kinds of birth. Next come the moths and the butterflies, and so on through the ants and the termites. Then know the kinds of quadrupeds of varied sorts, both large and small. Their birth is their distinctive mark, for there are many kinds of birth. Know those whose bellies are their feet, too, with the long-backed classes of snakes. Know, too, the water-dwelling fish that pasture in the liquid world. Next, know the birds that wing their way as they range in open skies. Their birth is their distinctive mark, for there are many kinds of birth.

"While in these births the differences of birth make their distinctive mark, with humans no differences of birth make a distinctive mark in them. Nor in the hairs, nor in the head, nor in the ears, nor the eyes, nor in the mouth, nor the nose, nor in the lips, nor the brows, nor in the shoulders or the neck, nor in the belly or the back, nor in the buttocks or the breast, nor in the genitals or in the ways of mating, nor in the hands nor the feet, the fingers or the nails, the knees nor the thighs, nor in their color or their voice."

Birth makes no distinctive mark as with other kinds of birth. In human bodies in themselves, nothing distinctive can be found. Distinctions among human beings are purely verbal designation.

Verbal designation is based on perception. We see differences in human beings. We perceive differences—tall, short, different hair color, different skin color, different genders. We see differences. What the Buddha is pointing to here is that there are no fundamental differences. It's verbal designation that creates these differences. And the reason he's pointing to this is around this question of Brahmins, because there was this belief by the one Brahmin that it's the lineage of birth that makes a difference—having pure lineage of having been Brahmin seven generations back, this makes one a Brahmin. The Buddha says it's action that makes one a Brahmin. What kind of birth you have has no bearing on that. One can become free, one can become liberated, no matter what.

And he goes on:

For name and clan are assigned as mere designations in the world, originating in convention. They are assigned here and there. For those who do not know this fact, wrong views have long underlain their hearts. Not knowing this, they declare to us one is a Brahmin by birth.

For those who do not know this fact, wrong views have long underlain their hearts. The belief that these distinctions are somehow important—in this case, in terms of being a Brahmin. When we create ideologies around these distinctions, strong views around these distinctions, this creates so much suffering externally in our world.

Now, the process of perception not only creates suffering externally. Perception and papañca. Perception itself doesn't create suffering. Perception is just perception. But it is this misunderstanding, this reification. Reification is another good word that could be used to translate papañca, I think. Reification meaning taking something to be concrete that is not.

All of our physical and mental experience is created by our minds. I do happen to think there is a world out there. I think you're out there. I believe that. I don't think I'm just sitting like a brain in a vat. So I think there is a reflection—this is a reflection of reality, what's being experienced. And I think it does a pretty good job; our brains do a pretty good job, our minds do a pretty good job of perceiving the world. And yet this mistake of believing it to be reality—delusion basically convinces perception to believe in the reality of perception. That we're experiencing something out there rather than what's actually happening, rather than it being constructed by our minds.

Everything that we experience without exception is constructed in our minds. And these constructions are so often influenced by views, ideas, opinions. This brings me back to what John said last night from Thich Nhat Hanh: for things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them. In other places the Buddha pointed to just meeting the bare experience. In the seen is only the seen. We take in this—no, this is what is seen, this is what's perceived.

Everything that we experience is created by our minds. The suffering comes partly because we believe. There's this reification, this picking it up as something. Oh, this is a something. Oh, this is a something. Oh,

this is a something. And we have these somethings that we like, that we want more of. We have these somethings that we don't like, that we want to get rid of.

So suffering. We're back to suffering. Craving and clinging, this wanting things to be a certain way. Craving and clinging—I think we all are really familiar with now. This is something that happens in our mind.

Craving and clinging are constructs of the mind. Embedded within them is delusion—the belief that there is something to cling to, something to crave. But what we want, what that craving reaches for, what that clinging wants to hold onto, is actually nothing more than a construction of our own minds.

And so craving—these processes in our mind that contribute to suffering—what they want, what they crave, is nothing more than a blip in our minds as well. It's another construct of the mind.

When our mind starts to witness these processes at work, when it sees its own role in the creation of suffering, it begins to recognize: craving—that's the mind. What craving wants—that's the mind too.

When the mind begins to witness its own role in the creation of suffering, wisdom grows around that understanding. This wisdom helps the mind let go of those misunderstandings, helps the mind release these processes of delusion.

Now let's sit for a moment.

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