Noticing Perception

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:00:25

This evening I'd like to reflect on the process of perception.

We've been talking about this quite a bit, and tonight I'd like to come at it from the perspective of seeing the process of perception itself—how it's conditioned, how it confuses us, how it gets us caught in misperceptions. Some of this will be revisiting things we've talked about, but perhaps from a slightly different perspective.

One thing I want to say at the beginning is that I'm going to be talking about how we might be able to recognize perception at work in our minds. And yet this isn't, as we've said a number of times, an instruction to try to do that, to try to look for it or see it. That can be a way to explore these aggregates, perception being one of the five aggregates. We can sometimes aim or direct toward trying to look at those aspects of our experience. But there's another way into this whole thing.

The way I found it worked for me with Sayadaw U Tejaniya is that sometimes he would start talking about something. On one retreat in particular, he talked about perception a lot. Almost every group I was in, he was talking about perception—how perception and delusion kind of mixed it up. And without trying, just being in the field of that curiosity that Sayadaw had about perception, my mind started to be curious about perception, and I started seeing it in different ways.

So this also can be a way that we start to see something or recognize something—not so much by trying to find it, but just being in the field of discussion about it or exploration about it. As we've said, as the mindfulness gets more continuous, it can start to see things more clearly; sometimes it can start to see more subtlety. This is one of the areas it can start to see. So just take it in that way. This isn't something to leave the hall and start trying to do.

A little bit of a review about what perception is: perception as one of the five aggregates. We've talked about those a couple of times now in the hall—these functions of mind. I talk about them as being functions or processes of mind that kind of make up what we are experiencing.

Just to name them: there's the aggregate of the body, of form, the physical aspect of experience. Then there's feeling, the process of experiencing pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. There's the process of perception, of recognizing experience. There are mental formations, the volitional activities of mind, which includes thoughts, emotions, and beliefs—all the wholesome and unwholesome qualities of our mind. This includes things like greed, aversion, and delusion. It includes things like mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom. So that's a big bucket, the mental formations. And then there's consciousness,

this kind of bare recognition of experience, the knowing of experience, the meeting of experience at a sense door—contact with the eye door, and eye consciousness arises.

There are six kinds of consciousness: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness. Likewise with perception—six classes of perception, the same six classes. Feeling also has the same six classes. These aggregates work with the six sense bases; each sense base will have these aggregates connected with it.

One of the things about perception, feeling, and consciousness: I think of those three as kind of the bare experience of what we're experiencing. The mental formations are in relationship to what we are experiencing. So perception, feeling, and consciousness—that's kind of how we know our experience. Sometimes we know it more through the feeling door, the feeling experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Sometimes we know it more just through the knowing; we just know the experience. And sometimes we know it through this aspect of perception.

Perception, I think, is one of the functions of mind where we really tend to land with our understanding of our world, because it is that function that helps us to recognize experience. It operates with memory. We meet experience over and over again, and as we meet experience—in a field of learning with our families as we grow up—we're told, "Well, that's a chair," and "That's a wall." We're given names for things. And we begin to recognize walls that we've never seen before because of this pattern matching, this way we have of recognizing experience.

That is a really useful function in our minds. We can recognize something that we've never seen before, never experienced before, because of its similarity to things that we have experienced.

And this process does make mistakes. We'll get into that.

So this mental process of recognition is related to memory in a way. It is connected to what we've learned. When there's contact with the eye or ear—a stimulus—it's almost like the process of perception is the mind going into its memory banks and saying, "What is this like? What's the closest match I can find for this stimulus that's coming into my eye or my ear?"

Perception also has a kind of layered nature to it. Perception can work at a level that's very basic—just in the eye door, for instance, recognizing form and color, shape, shadow, light and dark, without much orientation to what the experience is or what the name of the experience is, other than "that's light" or "that's dark," or "that's a square" or "that's a circle." Form, color—that's one layer of how perception can work. And then we may start there, just noticing squares and circles, and then we might recognize them as zabutans and zafus.

This kind of seeing of how perception functions—I don't see this all the time, but every now and then there's a really clear example of it: the mind, through the continuity of mindfulness, able to watch the mind put a perception together. This happened for me on one retreat. I was sitting outside and my head

turned, and it just landed on a shape. I watched the mind name the color, the form. It landed on a shape, and it's like I heard the mind saying, "Green. Jagged." And then it came up with the perception "leaf." So the perception was layered on top of the more basic perceptions of green and the jagged shape. Then "leaf" kind of popped into the mind as the recognition of what that form was.

Perception often happens in the mind as a kind of subtle form of thought. In that example, it was those words popping into my mind. I wasn't trying to identify that thing personally. I wasn't trying to do that. That was the process of perception recognizing green, jagged, leaf. In that case, those perceptions appeared in the mind as those words. This is one way that perceptions can appear—we can recognize the name of something.

But just as thoughts can appear in our minds through any sense door, we may experience thoughts as words in our mind or as images—almost as if we're talking to ourselves through the ear, like we're hearing something or seeing something. Thoughts can be in these different forms. They can even be, I think I mentioned, the sense of thinking physically, through dance—the feeling of the dance. I would think it and feel it. That's another way that thoughts can arise.

And so perception also can happen through any of these doorways. I'd say probably for most of us, perceptions will often happen through those sense doors that are our strongest. So often for those of us who are sighted and who have hearing and language, the perception often comes as a visual image or as a word in the mind, as if we're saying the word in the mind.

Often we talk about perception from this perspective of the recognition of objects, and this is one of the main ways that perception works—it's an easy way to talk about it. But there are some other functions of perception. Perception also creates the experience of location, of space.

I experienced this when I was in Hawaii practicing for quite a long time. I was in a little cottage, meditating inside, and there are so many birds there. You may experience this here at certain times of the day when the birds are really singing. But my experience was, as the birds sang—and they were loud—there was a sense of hearing happening, a recognition of "bird," and often an image of a bird in my mind. I would envision these birds walking around on the ground—the francolins in particular, they're really noisy. And I would envision them, I would see them, but I would also have this feeling of the mind launching into space in the direction that I thought the bird was. The creation of the distance and the location of the bird. There was this clear sense of the mind trying to locate the bird.

And that is also a part of the perceptual process.

I've experienced a flavor of how the mind orients towards space habitually. At my parents' house, there's a stairway, and the stairs are all the same height—mostly—when we're going upstairs. We don't recognize how the perception of the first couple of stairs affects us in terms of the rest. We expect the stairs will all be about the same height. In my parents' house, the top step is about an inch and a half shorter. And every

time, for years, it took a long time before I didn't land funny at that top stair. The mind was expecting a certain height to land on, and when it wasn't there, there was a kind of drop. That too is perception at work.

Perception works in different ways. I think there is also perception around time, perception around the location of our body, the orientation of our body upright. We feel this in airplanes sometimes—when the airplane tips, we feel the shift of our body in space. These kinds of things are related to perception.

Perception is a really useful process, recognizing what's around us and what objects are. It's really useful, and it's just something that happens. It's not something we're trying to stop from happening. But what we often do is mistake some things about perception. There are confusions and delusions that arise around perception. I want to speak to some of that, but first I want to talk a little about beginning to see this process, see perception working.

For me, the place where this has been most obvious, where it's easiest to see, where it naturally arises with a little more continuity of mindfulness, is when I'm hearing sounds. What I might experience is the hearing, the experience of the sound in the ear—the sound of a woodpecker. The sound is just the sound. And then in the mind, the word "woodpecker" appears, if you know what a woodpecker is. Or maybe an image of a woodpecker appears. It may even appear in context. Sometimes with birds, I may see them on the branch of a tree. It's not just a bird with no background—the bird appears in context. That image or word, that's perception at work.

And quickly, as Carol mentioned the other night, very quickly what can happen is we go from that bare recognition of "that's what that is" to thinking about it, to having ideas and beliefs and opinions about it, to having reactions to it. The perception can be a launching point for so much of that slippery slope towards *papañca* that Carol talked about.

If we can start to recognize perception, when we start to see the perception itself—and my speaking about this might create that kind of interest, that "oh, that's perception"—the seeing of it may help to keep it just at that level, not going down the slope of "oh, where might that woodpecker be and where can I find it?" and "let me go out on my next walking and see if I can find woodpeckers." Just: there was the perception, there was the sound, and there was the recognition. It was a woodpecker.

Sometimes I've seen with the process of perception, when conditions are a little fuzzy—like seeing in dim light—I'll watch the mind experimenting, exploring: "What is that? What is that experience?" One time I walked into the common area room we were sharing, and the light was really dim.

It was night. It was dark. There was just one little light on in the corner, very dim. And there was this big, massive shape there. My mind went, "It's a deformed being." And then, "No, I'm pretty sure it's not a deformed being." But it tried on three or four different perceptions before it landed on, "Oh, it's a vase of flowers."

Sometimes that can be fun to see—how the mind works. I just saw this the other day, actually. I was walking somewhere in this vicinity around IMS, near a parking lot, and there was this massive boulder in the parking lot. I thought, "Wow, I don't remember seeing that massive boulder." The next moment it was like, "Oh no, that's a car with a car cover on it." Again, the perception—when I first looked at it, yeah, it kind of looked like a big boulder. But no, it was just perception making a mistake.

It's also helpful to look at perception as we see it at work. We begin to recognize perception at times, and we get a sense of the difference between perception and thinking—where it has slipped from just the recognition of what's there, how we're meeting experience, into the thinking about it. When we see perception working, it has less opportunity to deceive us, to fool us.

Perception is very intertwined with the process of conditioning. And the process of perception can get us into trouble when we don't quite see how it works.

There's an analogy that the Buddha uses for each of the aggregates, and I won't go through them all now, but just the one for perception. He says that perception is like a mirage. Each of these analogies is a kind of description, an analogy of how that experience may feel. But it also brings in some of the way that aggregate tends to carry a delusive nature—how we get confused about it.

With perception, this is such a great analogy. Perception is like a mirage. If we unpack what a mirage is—I think the classic mirage that we're all familiar with, that probably most of us have experienced or seen, is on a warm day in a dry climate, like the classic image of seeing water in a desert. What that is, at least as I understand how it works, is that the air waves and the heat create this optical refraction that makes like a mirror out of the air. What we're seeing is the sky reflected on the ground. And it looks like water. We're seeing something that we've got a history of. It's like, "Oh, that looks like water." I've seen in Death Valley not only the blue water, but also distant objects reflected in it. It's really quite compelling. This looks like water. But it is basically an optical pattern. They don't call it exactly an illusion because it's not that something is there that's not there. It's a reflection of something that is there. But it's being misperceived—often misperceived.

This is perfect as an analogy for perception. Because perception is our way of experiencing the world—one of the key functions through which we experience the world, along with feeling and knowing. What we are experiencing is a reflection of something that's out there. But we're not experiencing what's out there. We're experiencing the reflection. We're experiencing the mind's construction based on memory, based on prior history, based on conditioning. We are experiencing what the mind has constructed.

We're not experiencing the world directly. We experience the world through our mind's creation of it. This is quite profound and quite startling when we start to see it. All of our experience, everything that we experience, is created by our minds.

the mirage—often those mirages can be misunderstood. And this is pointing to how we misunderstand perception. We take our perceptions to be accurate representations of reality, and that's one of the big places we get caught, one of the ways we get confused by perception.

Because this process—because what we are experiencing is what's created by our mind—this process is prone to distortion. It can be distorted by interpretation and is affected by conditioning. What we perceive, how we perceive the world... we kind of think we're taking in the world like we're cameras and microphones picking up what's actually out there, and that what we're experiencing is that recording somehow. But that's not quite the way our minds work. Our minds are much more influenced by history and conditioning. What we are taking in is already shaped by past conditions.

So our perceptions are not pure, let's say. They are influenced by our history, our upbringing, our ideas. And then likewise, our perceptions will come into relationship with our ideas and beliefs, and so what we perceive will then shape how we relate to things.

An example that kind of incorporates both of these sides: This experience happened at Shwe Oo Min practicing with Sayadaw, probably during that retreat when he was talking about perception so much. So it was appropriate—the exploration and what happened here. This happened over the course of a number of days.

I was practicing in my room, mostly in the evenings. Around the same time each evening, there was this squealing noise that started happening. And the perception that arose in the mind was that this was a pig squealing. This was conditioned by my past—I had heard pigs squealing, so I perceived this as a pig. And then the mind started to go into some thinking and some ideas about the pig, and some *pañña* about what was going on with the pig.

It was happening so regularly every night. The monastery is pretty close to the village, and my room was pretty close to the monastery wall. So I had this thought that on the other side of that wall was the local butcher, and the squealing was the pig being slaughtered for the market the next day.

I knew that this was all a story, that I did not actually know whether the pig was being butchered. Maybe it was just a pig squealing every night. But anyway, that's what the mind had done with that squealing. And it happened regularly. I don't remember how long it took for the story about the butcher to arise over the days, but it arose. And over the days I was feeling all this compassion for the pig each evening.

Then one night I decided instead to do a walking meditation at that time rather than sitting in my room. As I was walking up and down the walkway, there were these bats flying around, swooping. It was kind of startling—they would fly right at you and then just miss. And these bats were squealing. I immediately recognized that this is what I had been hearing, and that the perception of a pig had been a misperception.

Now, I kind of knew that the story about the butcher shop was a construction in my mind—there's no need for compassion if they're bats, not pigs. But what I had no idea of was that it was not a pig. That was

a shock.

Seeing how the perception can make a mistake—it was a kind of innocent mistake, because that squealing was the only experience I'd had of that kind. It was the best match this mind could find for that sound. So that part was conditioned: the seeing of it as a pig, the recognizing it as a pig. And then the squealing itself sounded distressed, so that perception conditioned what arose next.

Distressed squealing is what conditioned the whole chain of assumptions and views about the pig being slaughtered and the compassion that arose with that. So perceptions play with conditioning in fascinating ways.

This experience also made it very clear to me that the whole thing around the compassion and all of that—it was not responding to something that was out there. It was responding to a construction of my own mind. It was responding to the construction that this was a pig. And it was just a construction of the mind.

So there are really many layers of understanding that happened with this. The seeing of the perception and the whole conditioning process, but also the seeing that the experience was just in the mind. The recognition, the perception, what I was perceiving—that was a mental function. It was just the mind doing that. Everything that we experience, everything is created by our minds.

I'd say that perception and feeling and knowing does a pretty good job of helping us navigate the world. It does a pretty good job of representing things. But it is so prone to mistake and error. It's really humbling to see how much we are attributing reality to our perceptions. Delusion is what convinces the mind to believe that perceptions are what is out there.

We can work with perceptions. It's not that we're trying to stop perception or not have perception, but we do need to know that perception has this nature of being conditioned, being influenced by past conditioning, that it's not necessarily accurate.

There was an exhibit I saw at a science museum in San Francisco called the Exploratorium. This was a number of years ago. My nephew had come out for a visit, and I thought, this is a great place—let's go to the Exploratorium. It's a fun place with all these science exhibits, things that point out different ways that our world works and how we see the world. It's got all kinds of interesting things.

We walked in, and I noticed on the back—it's a big cavernous warehouse-type place, just open with all these different exhibits around—hanging up in the air were these bars. They were probably six feet tall, spaced maybe about three or four feet apart. Just tube bars hanging from the ceiling, and there were lights flashing on them. That was my first experience with that exhibit: seeing from a distance bars with lights flashing on them hanging from the ceiling. I thought, huh, I wonder what that's about. I'll have to check that out later.

We wandered around, and at some point came and sat down, resting our feet and having a drink. My nephew was sitting there looking up at the ceiling, and he said, "Oh, it's a school bus."

I looked up to where he was looking and it was the bars with flashing lights on them. I did not see a school bus there. I saw yellow lights flashing on most of the bars with an occasional red light. I thought, what? What are you talking about?

Then he said, "Oh, now it's butterflies." I thought, what?

So I stood there for a while, wondering what's going on here. What is he seeing? I stood there and it just took a kind of relaxation of the eye, and suddenly the mind perceived that there was a screen hanging from the ceiling. A screen that was about forty feet wide and six feet high. And across that screen was driving a school bus. The image was so detailed that I could read the name of the school district on the side of the school bus.

And I knew that I was not seeing a school bus, that all that was happening were flashing lights on those bars. The mind

This was an exhibit on perception and how the mind holds on to what we've just perceived for a few moments. And in this case, if you kind of held on, it seemed to be functioning with the way our sense apparatus works. The school bus was driving across the picture, so the lights on this bar were being—in the mind—carried from one bar to the next. The timing of the flashing lights was just right such that by the time the eye and the mind carried that set of flashing lights across, and it carried multiple versions of that flashing light across to get the image, it was stunning to see: this is mind-made. This is mind-made. This is the kind of thing that goes on all the time and we don't notice it. We don't recognize it—this way that the mind holds on to experience.

And it's useful. It is very useful that our minds hold on to and stabilize experience. This is one of the functions of perception: it stabilizes our world. What's actually going on in our visual field as I'm looking around is pretty chaotic. As I move my head, it looks like you're all staying pretty still. But if there were a camera doing what my eye does, it would be pretty jumpy. We would see that it was bouncing around. So our perceptual field tends to stabilize. The perceptual processes tend to stabilize our experience. And perception also holds on to the last things it has perceived to smooth out the experience—as that example with the lights and bars at the Exploratorium and seeing the school bus illustrated.

This is both a feature and one of the big ways we get caught, because we believe in the stability of our world. We believe in the stability of experience. This, I think, is one of the key ways we have the misperception that takes what is impermanent to be permanent—because of very fundamental ways our perception works, this stabilizing nature of perception. And this is where the delusion creeps in too. We believe that stability. So much suffering happens around this.

In terms of suffering and clinging, I think we do really get the flavor of the experience of suffering

through the experience of craving and clinging and aversion and greed. We get the flavor of suffering, and we understand that we're clinging to something. Many of us understand the suffering is our mind's doing. We begin to get that—our minds are creating the suffering by trying to cling to things.

What's a little harder to see is that what we are clinging to is also made by our minds. We are clinging to stuff our mind makes up. Now, it is reflective of what's out there, but we can't actually cling to what's out there because what we're experiencing is what's created by our minds. And this process of perception is really playing into the stabilizing, into thinking there is something to cling to. The idea, the concept, the perception—the whole process kind of gets stabilized, and we can hold on to concepts and perceptions. The mind can repeat perceptions. And that's, again, a feature. It helps us to smooth out the experience so that we're not in a chaotic perceptual field. But it also gets misunderstood to be the nature of things—as being stable. And they are not stable.

So this, I think, is part of the encouragement to cultivate the perception of impermanence. Our minds habitually cultivate the perception of stability. That's the way our sensory apparatus has functioned. And so it's interesting to me that the Buddha used that phrase: cultivate the perception of impermanence. Often these three—anicca, dukkha, anattā; impermanent, unreliable, not-self—are described as characteristics. And that makes it sound like there's something out there that they're characteristic of. In the suttas, the words for impermanent, unreliable, and not-self are not connected with that word in the texts.

The word for characteristic, *lakkhaṇa*, is not actually used in the text of the sutta itself. It's assigned as a name to one of the suttas—the Anattā Lakkhaṇa Sutta, the Characteristic of Not-Self—but within the discourse, that word is not used. What is used over and over again is to cultivate the perception, or to observe impermanence, observe unreliability, observe not-self.

To me this is another piece of teaching that reveals why he uses this language—cultivate the perception of impermanence—because what we are experiencing is what's been created in our mind. All that we can know is our perceptions, our experience. That pointing to cultivate the perception of not-self, as opposed to "see that this is true in the world," really indicates to me that the Buddha was directing us to experience over and over again. He's pointing to: know the experience, know what's happening here.

Then we can see that with the way the mind functions, there are times it perceives things as stable and times it perceives things as changing. Sometimes it's useful to perceive things as stable. The Buddha is pointing to the usefulness of recognizing the perception of impermanence. Because when the mind sees the perception of impermanence, it encounters the counterpoint to seeing things as stable. It's like: well, sometimes it feels stable, sometimes it feels impermanent. The mind understands that this is a perception. And it also begins to understand that experience is unreliable as something to cling to, because we want to cling to something stable.

The whole process of clinging is about landing and staying—taking a stand, finding that landing spot. And

there's nowhere to land. The trying to land on something, the clinging to something, will reveal itself in its changing nature at some point, and then suffering will arise.

So the Buddha said: cultivate the perception of impermanence. It will support the understanding of unreliability, of the dukkha nature of experience, and it will support the understanding of the not-self nature of experience. He encouraged us to cultivate all of these—the perception of dukkha, the perception of unreliability, and the perception of not-self.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.