Perception & Thought

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 45:24

Watching you all walk in here, I felt like there were so many different realities walking through the door. The same, seemingly the same experience, but probably so many different interpretations going on.

Tonight I want to talk about perception and the power of thought.

Sharon briefly mentioned this saying from the Buddha a few weeks ago: that we are what we think, all that we are arises with our thoughts, with our thoughts we make the world. Scary, isn't it? He goes on to say, "Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own thoughts unguarded. But once mastered, no one can help you as much, not even your father or your mother." It's a pretty powerful statement.

After sitting here for—how long is it, five weeks?—you probably are getting some taste of how bad an enemy our unguarded thoughts can be, how powerful thoughts can be. Thoughts are amazing. They really do create the world in a very concrete sense. Somebody had the thought, "Let's buy a meditation center," and twenty years later, this is here and all of us are here, as a result of that one thought. It's quite amazing.

And yet we so easily get lost, tormented in our thoughts. How much of your meditation time has been spent in some kind of struggle? And when—say yesterday—that tangle of unbearable experience was brought about by thought, where's that tangle of thought now? What was so difficult about it? Why do those thoughts have so much power to torment us, to assail us?

Because when we really look at thought as a thought, what is it? If you take a really neutral thought—"the carpet is red"—gone. Ephemeral. There's nothing to it.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "Like waves, all the activities of this life have rolled endless on, yet they have left us empty-handed. Myriads of thoughts have run through our minds, but all they have done is increase our confusion and dissatisfaction. When a rainbow appears, we see many beautiful colors. Yet a rainbow is not something we can clothe ourselves with or wear as an ornament. It simply appears through the conjunction of various conditions. Thoughts arise in the mind in exactly the same way. They have no tangible reality or intrinsic existence at all. There is therefore no logical reason why thought should have so much power over us, nor any reason why we should be enslaved by them."

Does that make you feel better? No logical reason.

Well, I want to talk a little bit about some of the—in a way they are logical reasons—how we get so caught in thoughts. Why do we get so enslaved? Two specific areas I want to speak about: unwise attention, which is fueled by misperception.

Unwise attention is basically paying attention to the wrong thing. Wrong meaning it takes us into more suffering. So in thought, unwise attention is getting caught in paying attention to the content, to the emotional story, not seeing thought as thought, not bringing attention right to the bare experience. And misperception is what fuels this unwise attention.

Really, the beginning of our confusion—of not seeing the ephemeral nature of thought and of being so tormented, spending our whole meditation trying to have better thoughts, or no thoughts (that would be the preference, of course, but since that's a rare occurrence, better thoughts would do), and hating ourselves, fearing our thoughts when they're not what we like—it's so much suffering. Of course, the root of it is not seeing that thought is nothing to be afraid of.

But what fuels this on a very basic level, and I find this particularly fascinating, is that the beginning of our confusion is at the level of basic perception.

Perception is this: when there's a sense contact, you hear a sound. The moment of hearing is just hearing. Perception is the recognition, the discernment of what it is. So that's hearing a bell, knowing it is a bell. It involves memory, but it's one of the basic mental factors that is said to arise in every mind moment. In fact, when the Buddha speaks of the five aggregates—the five factors of mind and body that he calls a human being, each arising in each moment—perception is one of these five.

So this recognition, this memory recognition of a sense contact, is perception.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. All of them. That's why there is so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. Mistaken perception is, in a way, on a moment-to-moment basis, at the very root of so much of the following confusion and suffering.

So what does this mean, mistaken perception? Why and how does it happen?

Well, you might have guessed that when our old friends happen to be present in the mind—our old friends the afflictive emotions, our three root afflictions: greed, hatred, and confusion or delusion in any of their manifestations—when in a moment of perception one of these three is present as a mental factor, it tends to distort the perception. And if we're not aware of it, it's really fascinating because we actually perceive incorrectly. From that perception comes more interpretations and emotions, and then we can actually act on that incorrect perception.

For example, in one place that we teach in the desert in the spring, the meditation hall has a big sign on it—it's called "Perceptory." One woman who was obviously having a very bad day told me as she walked up to it, she looked at it, really looked at it, and read "Purgatory." That's just what it said. Mistaken perception, simply clouded.

We do this in lots of ways. When the mind is filled with fear, we can actually perceive a person or a thing that's fairly innocuous as being really fearful or really ugly.

One time I was in the hospital, kind of out of it for a few days. I was under drugs and in a lot of pain, and a nurse came in very early in the morning to wake me up, to weigh me, about six in the morning. I woke up in a lovely frame of mind—angry, but also really filled with fear, this kind of weird paranoia you can get in the hospital. And I visually perceived her as demonic. I mean, she really looked like an evil demon person to me. And once perceived, we act on it. So I practically bit her head off, the poor lady.

The next morning she came, same woman, same time. I was in a different state of mind, and I saw a very nice, scared-looking lady coming to wake me up. And I felt really bad.

But you see, it's not even that we see something and then think about it in a different way. We actually perceive incorrectly. And once that perception has entered incorrectly, it leads to all kinds of actions, all kinds of doing. This is basically how we can, in our actions, get so far afield so quickly.

The examples I have given are ones of aversion, but really the root distortion, the root that leads to misperceptions, is the mental factor of delusion or ignorance. We've talked about craving, we've talked about aversion, we've talked about delusion, but what we can begin to see is that delusion is only another mental factor. Ignorance, delusion, confusion—we can actually begin to recognize it when it's present and when it's not.

It's not like delusion is some massive, monolithic, unchanging state that we're chipping away at little by little and someday it'll be gone. It arises and passes in moments of the mind just like any other state. So it has characteristics: confusion, cloudiness, dullness.

What tends to happen when there's confusion in the mind is we don't recognize correctly. Sometimes we'll just see or hear or feel or think a part of something, and then out of not seeing it all, the ignorance will use memory to supply the rest, but it comes up with an inaccurate perception.

Once I was walking in the woods in Switzerland behind a retreat we were leading, very nice lovely woods, with my boyfriend. I looked over to the side and I saw this huge yellow and white striped circus tent. I thought, that's really weird for a circus tent to be in these quiet woods. And I said as much to my friend. He looked at me like I was really weird. Because, of course, as I looked again, there was no circus tent. It was just a big rock with a little bit of yellow lichen running on it.

That's the way ignorance functions in the moment to give a misperception. We sort of recognize a few things, don't either look clearly or don't have all the information, but ignorance makes up a perception. Well, that one's not too difficult to see through. Some can be much more complicated. But just to recognize the state of the mental factor of confusion itself begins to be very helpful.

This quality of dullness manifests as a kind of knowing that you don't quite know what's going on. One way it can manifest—and this happens to me far more than I care to admit—is when I'm driving somewhere and suddenly I won't have a clue where I am, what part of the world I'm in, what season of the year it is. Often I'll be driving into Barre and I'll have this moment of complete delusion: Is this April?

Is this October? It's Christmas time! Then I'll have to look around for clues as to the season, and gradually I'll remember where I'm going and what I'm doing and sort of get back to reality—alright, this is October, we're in the middle of the three-month course. That's delusion, one way it shows up.

The classic example given in the Buddhist texts is a kind of twilight state—really, the twilight zone—where you're walking in a forest at twilight, so you can just see but not quite clearly. In that seeing, you notice something hanging from a tree, and in that moment of recognition comes the perception: a snake. If it's somewhere with poisonous snakes, or depending on your relationship to snakes, that moment of recognition leads to more thoughts—how many snakes might there be, I'd better get out of here—which leads to emotions, to fear. It begins to color the way we relate to the whole forest. We thought it was nice here, but really it's dangerous. It's not good to be here alone at night. In Thailand, this is literally true. To walk in a forest at night without a flashlight is risking your life because there are poisonous snakes everywhere. They won't bother you, but if you step on one, well, too bad for you. So such a perception could genuinely inspire a feeling of danger that we react upon.

Now, if we go closer and really look, the delusion might clear away and we see it's only a hanging vine. That affects the way we think, the emotions that arise, the way we act—we might keep walking calmly—and the feeling we have about the rest of the forest. It's very powerful, this one perception, and it leads into a whole field of reaction. This is the basic way that misperception functions, especially when fueled by ignorance.

The Dalai Lama says the antidote to ignorance is the correct perception of things, because this dispels the visiting obscurations. This sounds easier than we might think—just simply the correct perception of things. That's what our practice is all about here. It's not always as complicated as we might make it. It's simply learning how to have a correct perception of experience, moment after moment after moment. All that matters is just this one moment, having a correct perception.

But this misperception—mistaking a rock for a tent, or a rope or a vine for a snake, not perceiving accurately—this is the basic misperception we are experiencing about ourselves, moment after moment. We're misperceiving our mind and body experience. And this leads to the sense of self, to craving, to aversion, and to all the attendant confusions.

From the standpoint of perception, the reason we misperceive so greatly and so continuously is this: in every mind moment, as we said before, there are a lot of mind moments—seventeen trillion in the blink of an eye. A trillion is like million, billion, trillion. That's a lot. I don't know how many zeros. It's a lot of mind moments. If perception is arising in every mind moment—even forgetting the numbers—it's happening constantly. There's no way we're noticing every single perception that arises. I assume, anyway. I don't speak for everybody.

What we're calling "me"—this perception that seems like a continuous, ongoing self—we can actually begin to notice breaking down as we get quieter, as our mindfulness increases. What we're calling "me" is

really a series of constantly arising and passing experiences: physical sensations rising and falling, changing, with perceptions rising and falling; vedanā—feeling tone, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—coming and going; the knowing faculty coming and going with each new sense contact; and any of the mental formations, any emotions. Each of these is just coming and going, coming and going, so quickly, one after the other, not in any particular order. But it's so fast that when we don't really look, it seems solid, it seems continuous.

In some ways, it's like looking at a color photograph under a magnifying glass. This amazed me when I did it just a couple of years ago. I didn't know it was just a series of dots—four or five different colors of dots. That's all a photograph is when you look closely, like those impressionist pointillist paintings where, up close, it's just dots with no recognizable form at all. Then when we pull back, the picture clicks into place and looks completely solid.

So that's our practice: to really look deeply, not to stop at the surface appearance. And it's not easy, because seeing through it once isn't quite enough. How many times are we re-experiencing the misperception, the sense that we're solid, without even noticing?

aware of it in a conscious way. It's a background perception that might be going on a great deal of the time. When we don't really look, when we don't really explore, it's easy to take the perception for granted, just an assumption that this is how it is. We seem solid and continuous.

In fact, it's so obvious that even if intellectually we try to understand the idea of no continuous separate self, the idea of impermanence—and we really can on some level understand it—it isn't quite enough. That's why meditation, this ongoing looking, looking, looking, just to experience what's actually happening, matters so much. The intellectual understanding alone isn't enough to counter the ongoing misperception that we might not even be aware of.

It's so easy to assume that because we perceive things in a certain way, that's how it is. And because we mostly agree on perceptions, that's even another step—we tend to agree, so that's really how it must be. In fact, a lot of people here will mention in interviews that they'll talk about an experience and say, "Of course, I could never explain this to anybody else who wasn't here. I'd sound crazy." Sometimes people even wonder themselves, because the perceptions you're starting to become aware of don't always match the ongoing assumptions of how things are that we've been living with all our lives without recognizing it.

I read one of the little stories by Oliver Sacks, the neurologist who writes about all kinds of different, strange neurological distortions—really interesting. He was writing about a man who was blind. I forget whether he was born blind or became blind very young. Up until his forties or fifties, he was blind and had quite adapted. He worked, I think, as a masseur at his local YMCA and was going to get married. At some point, doctors found out they could do an operation that would remove the cataracts and restore his sight, which everyone was excited about, and which he did.

What was so interesting, really poignant—why Oliver Sacks was writing about it—is that of course, when the bandages first came off, his fiancée and others were there asking, "Oh, wow, what do you see?" Well, of course, he couldn't make any sense whatsoever out of the visual field. It was just this jumble of sight and form, and actually quite scary, because it didn't conform at all to the world as his perceptions had formed it. He had to really work hard at it, and I think over time he got to where he could make some sense of the visual world. But it was never easy for him. In fact, it was very anxiety-provoking.

He would say that sometimes while eating, trying to use a knife and fork in the way sighted people do, at some point it would just get so stressful that he'd say, "I have to give it up. I have to lapse back into my older behavior." Because for him, all the perception and construction of the world was through touch and sound. Shaving in a mirror was extremely difficult, but just closing his eyes and shaving in the dark—no problem. In fact, in some way the quality of his life really deteriorated after the operation, even as he could begin to see, because he never could really make that perceptual shift.

This is so interesting. How I just take for granted that what I see is how it is. It's not true at all. It's not the least bit how it is. But we've gotten so used to these perceptions.

So that's our practice here: to look deeply, moment after moment, into our mind and body experience without preconceptions—or at least noticing our preconceptions—and letting the actual perception of what happens be received without having to twist it to fit a preconceived notion.

There can be times in practice where we literally begin to perceive the body in a different way, where there's just a sense of arising and passing sensations—sometimes slowly, sometimes more quickly, sometimes nothing lasting longer than a flash. Once, someone was describing to Sayadaw a sense of a sensation arising in their arm and moving up the arm, describing how it was moving all over. And he just looked and said, "Nothing's moving. There's not one sensation that's moving all around. It's lots of different sensations arising, passing, arising and passing. We're giving it some kind of continuity with thought. That's an interpretation."

So it's really going back and being with the sense contact, the perception. Sometimes sensations are rising and passing, no longer than a flash. Sometimes there's no outline, no shape to the body, no sense of where the body begins or ends. Sometimes you're just noticing sensation, and then you'll notice an image arise of "knee," and then an image arise of knee in relationship to body, and you become vividly aware: that's all that's happening. A sensation arising in awareness, an image arising in awareness. Just because there's an image of knee, that's not the same as solid body sitting here. It's simply an image arising and passing. And in that moment there can literally be no perception whatsoever of solid body.

Now, a lot of times we don't like this too much.

And in fact, when this isn't a thought, when it's an actual perception, there's no solidity, there's no body one can even refer to, just very fast arising and passing. It can feel quite threatening, and often fear will

come up as a result of this shift in perception.

But that's all it is—fear arising. It's as if somehow we're going to lose our body and never be able to come back together again. But I'll say, so far, of all the three-month retreats that I've heard of, nobody has disintegrated into a cloud and not been able to find their body and walk out of here again. Because nothing is actually changing.

Our perceptions can begin to shift when we're just meeting the direct experience. But it's not that the body was solid and now it's disintegrating. It's the same as it's always been—constantly changing. In fact, the Buddha said once that if you must identify with something, it's better if it be the body, because the mind is changing even so much faster. At least the body is changing a little bit more slowly. It was just his way of saying: don't bother identifying with anything.

But this fear comes up as if somehow it's all going to fly away and we're not going to be able to function anymore. Rationally talking about it isn't going to keep that fear from arising. I just want to mention that it's often a normal response. You don't need to believe the fear. That's just another emotion, another mind state arising and going away. With wise attention, you simply notice that fear is fear. Just because fear arises doesn't make it true. Just because a thought arises with strong emotion attached doesn't make that thought more true. "The rug is red" is as equally important a thought as "Oh my God, I'm never going to be able to walk again." A thought is just a thought. The strong emotion doesn't make it more accurate, but we tend to believe it because there's strong emotion.

A friend of mine was telling me once about his experience in a retreat. He was really seeing the non-solidity, and the sense of self-attachment to mind and body was falling away for him. He said—and I loved this image, I don't know if it translates—he said, "It's not that anything's gone away or changed." He said, "It's like a cake that's baked in a pan, and after you've run a knife through and loosened the cake, it's still sitting in the pan, still has the same shape. But if you turn the pan over, the cake just drops out. There's nothing attaching it anymore." He said it felt like that for him. It looks the same, but there's no more attachment in it.

Well, that's how it is for us. We really are already cakes in the pan, and the knife's already been slid under—we just haven't noticed it yet. So our practice is really to bring this wise attention into our experience.

With unwise attention, which we practice a lot without realizing it, it's unwise attention that gives thought so much power. It's what makes thought such a burden. With unwise attention, we tend to isolate either a particular perception or the thought that arises from that perception, and then really dwell on the thought, on the interpretation, on the emotions that might come up—really dwell on it. And it makes it seem true. The more we think about it, somehow the truer it must be. And then we don't even notice, or we shut out, perceptions that don't match. This is unwise attention.

So for example, you can see how we do this in our perception of ourselves. I'm talking more on the personality level here. Think about whatever your most recent perception or description of yourself is, or how you think of yourself over the long term. That description, whatever it is, is bound to be a little bit one-sided and inaccurate. Any description is. But it can become so solidified from a particular perception that's probably inaccurate and then really dwelt on.

I'll give you an example that I had forgotten until recently in my life, but I see how this memory and this perception has colored my relationship to things for years. When I was about ten or eleven, in the fifth grade, I was taken along with some other girls and put in what I think was probably formally called a "remedial gym class." Of course, in the charming way of children—and I know this isn't politically correct, but this is what we called ourselves—we called ourselves "the retard gym class." There were about ten of us, and I don't know what occasioned our needing remedial gym, but for some reason we were in this class.

So the perception was that we were total klutzes, weren't fit to play kickball or whatever we were supposed to be playing with the other girls in the class, and had to go in this special class to learn how to function. That's all I can remember about it. I can't remember at all what we did in this class. But it really solidified my self-perception of being a very uncoordinated person who was no good at sports. And as a result, I came to really dislike any kind of physical games. As soon as the idea—"Let's go play baseball"—would come up, I would freeze inside. The perception would arise: "Well, I'm no good at baseball, and no one wants to play with me because I was in the remedial gym class."

And it's persisted to this day. I didn't even remember about this gym class until this spring, when something brought it up. But any kind of formed physical activity—walking is fine, anyone can just take a walk, that's okay—but anything with some kind of form to it, I immediately have a resistance. And it's very strong, to the point that even if I do the activity, I don't enjoy it. That perception is really set.

So this is how an early perception and the memory of it can really structure our ideas of ourselves. And it's unwise attention to really dwell on it, because what that blocks out, what I don't let in, is all the times that I do physical things and really enjoy it. I really like to swim, I like to take walks, I like to do qigong—if I don't get into comparing it to a form and trying to do it right or to look good. But if I don't notice the times that I enjoy it, I'll only notice the times that I don't, because it fits into all the interpretations that have arisen out of that perception.

We do this in our practice as well. We've made a certain perception and then, rather than let in the perception that's actually arising, we'll twist it, we'll misperceive to try and make it meet our previous ideas. Like that sense of solidity of body—when it goes away, rather than saying, "Oh, the solidity of body wasn't really true," we think, "Oh my God, I'm losing it, something's happening."

Or in another way, often people will report, "My mindfulness is gone. My concentration is gone. I can't hold to any object. As soon as the object comes, I can't stay with it." And we'll question, and we'll find out:

of course you can't stay with it, because the object isn't staying. As soon as it comes, it vanishes. But it's easy for people to say, "Oh, I have no mindfulness. I should be able to just glom onto this arising appearance and stay there as long as I want."

So our challenge with wise attention is simply to come back to the direct perception. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, to have a correct perception we need to have a direct encounter. That's all we're trying to do here—have a direct encounter with each of the six sense contacts without preconceived notions. That's our challenge in any moment. Can we let go of all self-definition, all concepts, all explanations, and just be with whatever it is? Pressure, hearing, seeing, thinking, emotion? Can we just be with the sensation in the body without having to have an explanation, without having to understand how it relates to my childhood and its arising because of this particular conglomeration of experiences that I've had, and that if I could really open and get to the bottom of it, I know all my sadness would open up and I would really move in practice? Could we just feel tightness without all of that?

It's not so easy. Who used to go in and report to Sayadaw U Pandita? Really, all he wants is: "Pressure arose. I noted it. After the third note, it passed. I went back to the breath." He doesn't want, "This pressure arose, it's from my childhood, and on and on and on." In fact, after a while, they just look at us as if to say, "Where are you guys getting this stuff? It's so simple. Pressure arose. You noticed. What happened to it? It went away. You make everything so complicated."

We do. And the point is not to note perfectly. The point is that with all our complications, with all our misperception, we're keeping ourselves from noticing the radiance of truth, our own radiant nature.

This is from Huang Po: Can we stop being blinded by our sight, our hearing, our feeling and knowing, and from the conceptual thinking arising from it? When blinded by this, we don't perceive the radiance of the source. When we're not deluded by conceptual thinking, this source will appear like the sun rising through the empty sky and illuminating the whole universe.

Simply being with the actual experience, with the actual sense contact—have a direct perception. This is wise attention. Don't try to analyze perceptions or think about them at all. Just bring wise attention back to the direct encounter. When we try to talk our way out of it or think our way out of it, it's like the mind is a ghost, and it's like a ghost fighting a ghost.

But with wise attention, we can really bypass all the conceptual thinking and come right back to the source of the perception. It just cuts all the extra.

To give you an example: this summer I was staying in a friend's house in Washington State on an island, a lovely place. One evening I was the only one there, and it actually felt quite safe. I didn't have any worry about intruders or anything. But that evening I was in the bathroom washing my face, and I heard this banging noise outside.

Again, the mind colored with ignorance. I couldn't recognize that sound, but immediately the mind had to

supply a perception, whether it knew what it was or not. If there was no ignorance, we would just think, "Oh, hearing. I don't know what that is." That's clarity. But instead: "Oh, hearing. I don't know what it is. It must be somebody breaking in." And immediately this rush of fear.

I was trying to just keep on washing my face, but the thoughts were going: "It couldn't be somebody breaking in. I know it's perfectly safe here. This woman has lived here for years. I feel perfectly safe. It couldn't possibly be." And of course, it's like fighting a ghost with a ghost. The fear is just streaming out, getting stronger and stronger. I couldn't bear it. I had to open the door, go out and look. Of course, there was nobody there.

So, okay, nobody's there. I go back in, shut the door again, and the fear starts: "Oh, somebody's breaking in." The thoughts would start. I said, why don't I try what I'm always talking about? Wise attention. I took my attention right back to feeling my hands in the water, feeling the washcloth.

It's amazing. As soon as I came back to direct contact with that moment's contact—because the sound wasn't happening anymore—the fear was gone. Just being with what is. No extras, no interpretation. As soon as a thought would come up—"Yeah, but what was that sound?"—back to the bare perception itself.

With the bare perception itself, we can be free of this tormenting struggle that we have with the sense door of thinking.

So let's just sit for a moment.

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