Beset by Perceptions (Madhupiṇḍika Sutta)

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 43:52

Tonight I'd like to discuss the sutta titled The Honey Ball. In parts of India, cakes baked from flour and honey and oil are still called honey balls. When Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and attendant, heard the discourse, he said it satisfied a spiritual seeker in the way a honey ball satisfies a famished man. So what we're getting tonight is some high calorie spiritual nourishment.

Now high calorie foods can also be heavy going on the system and I'd certainly rank this sutta as a difficult one to digest. Even in the original story, as you will see, the Buddha's disciples need three separate attempts to explain the matter before the penny drops.

Let's go through all three levels of explanation before looking at any one of them in detail. It all starts with the Buddha going into a wood for his day's abiding. A man named Dandapani is walking in the woods and seeing the Buddha approaches him and asks about his spiritual beliefs and practice. The Buddha replies:

"Friend, I assert and proclaim a teaching such that one does not quarrel with anyone in the world with its gods, its Maras and its Brahmas, in this generation with its recluses and Brahmins, its princes and its people, a teaching such that perceptions no more underlie that brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures, without perplexity, shorn of worry, free from craving for any kind of being."

In many of the suttas, the Buddha finds the exact teaching needed for whoever he is talking to, and that person becomes completely enlightened, though we 21st century seekers might be baffled by the Buddha's words. But Dandapani seems as perplexed as us modern-day dullards, and is described as shaking his head, wagging his tongue, and raising his eyebrows till his forehead was puckered into three lines, after which he departed, leaning on his stick. As an aside, Dandapani wasn't a recluse, and was wandering round the wood for exercise. Perhaps the Buddha's response irritated Dandapani enough to spur a spiritual quest at some later stage.

One way or another, Dandapani departs in a huff and the Buddha settles back to his meditation for the afternoon before later rejoining his disciples and telling them about his exchange with Dandapani. It seems the disciples were also puzzled by this summary of the *Dhamma* and one of them basically asked the Buddha what he is talking about.

So the Buddha offers this explanation: "Bhikkhu, as to the source by which perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man. If nothing is found there to delight in, welcome and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust, of the underlying tendency to aversion, of the underlying tendency to views, of the underlying tendency to doubt, of the underlying tendency to conceit, of the

underlying tendency to desire for being, of the underlying tendency to ignorance. This is the end of resorting to rods and weapons, of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice and false speech. Here these evil, unwholesome states cease without remainder."

Having said this much, the Buddha then leaves his disciples and retires into his dwelling. I imagine you will be relieved to hear that this explanation hasn't done much to satisfy the disciples, who then go to seek out a senior teacher to pick out the meaning of the Buddha's words. They chose Mahakaccana, who at first demurs, saying that they should have asked the Buddha, whom he likens to heartwood in the tree of Dhamma, while he, Mahakaccana, represents only the branches and leaves of that tree. But after a bit of persuasion, he agrees to give them his interpretation, which goes like this:

"Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is called 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 mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man with respect to past, future and present forms cognizable through the eye."

He goes on to say the same about all the other sense doors: hearing, tasting, smelling, body sensations and mind objects such as thoughts and perceptions. He then continues: "When there is the eye, form and eye-consciousness, it is possible to point out the manifestation of contact. When there is the manifestation of contact, it is possible to point out the manifestation of feeling," and so on until "When there is the manifestation of thinking, it is possible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation."

Likewise he says the same about all the other sense doors and then concludes with: "When there is no eye, no form, and no eye-consciousness, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of contact," and so on until, "when there is no manifestation of thinking, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation." And as usual, he says the same about all the other sense doors.

This, I'm sorry to have to tell you, is the end of the line as regards explanations. The bhikkhus, we are told, were delighted with Mahakaccana's words. But they went and checked them with the Buddha as Mahakaccana himself advised them to do. The Buddha praises Mahakaccana and says he would have said exactly the same thing if he had been pressed for a further explanation.

It's at this point that Ananda describes the sutta in terms of a honey ball, saying: "Just as if a man exhausted by hunger and weakness comes upon a honey ball, in the course of eating it would find a sweet, delectable flavour. So too, Venerable Sir, any able-minded bhikkhu, in the course of scrutinising with wisdom the meaning of this discourse on the Dhamma, would find satisfaction and confidence of mind." The Buddha seems pleased with Ananda's analogy and tells the assembly they should remember this discourse as the honey ball.

So let's nibble our way through the honey ball and see can we detect any of the sweet delectable flavour that Ananda found here. First, we have the Buddha's synopsis of the Dhamma for Dandapani which starts with the description of a world without conflict and follows with the description of being free from attachments with their burden of worry and strife. He describes freedom as a state where perceptions no longer underlie that brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures. He is linking internal and external conflict with being attached to and somehow founded upon our perceptions. His Dhamma, he declares, cuts through all that so that we find ourselves at peace with the world.

He describes this peace as applying to the worldly level of princes and men. All our worldly concerns fade away. We are also at peace with the heavenly realm of gods and the hell realm of Mara. In an age so dominated by science and technology, it's not easy for us to think of heaven and hell realms. Instead, we can think of these as temporary mind states, heavenly bliss and hellish rage. We no longer quarrel with whatever we come up against in the external world or in any of the internal worlds we experience within our minds.

I don't think any of us would quarrel with the notion of inner peace and making peace with the world. It's the phrase, "Perceptions no longer underlie that brahmin who abides non-attached to sensual pleasures," which stumps us, and like Dandapani, be causing our brows to furrow into the three lines and tempting us to stomp off.

And sure enough, when his disciples ask the Buddha to explain himself, he expands on the issue of perception and how they can lead to grief. Perceptions, if you remember, are the labels we place on whatever sense data comes to us. If our eye falls on some green grass, our mind sorts through its memories of stuff that is shaped and coloured like this and comes up with perceptions "green" and "grass." We might then quietly add a perception like "unimportant," as we move on to label the next bit of incoming sense data.

In this explanation of his message to Dandapani, the Buddha basically says that if only we can stop delighting in the source of perceptions that beset us, then we'd be freed from underlying tendencies to lust and other afflictions. There's a lot to think about here. He is saying that we delight in exactly that which is causing us to suffer. Although our perceptions beset us, cause us grief, the only reason they are doing that is because we delight in the source of these perceptions. We're in a mess, it seems.

Let's look at a possible example. Suppose I'm fretting about my neighbour's dogs who I hear growling in her back garden. There may be many levels to the mental disturbance. Concern that the dogs might start fighting, grief at the thought that they are possibly being neglected, instinctive fear at the sound of growling. All of these can set off chains of thought. Is there going to be a fight? What should I do? Will I get hurt? Each of these thoughts involves a long string of perceptions. Even the basic sound had to be perceived as growling and with that perceptions like "danger" would have emerged.

Although I'm getting stressed out by all my thoughts about the dogs and what might happen, the Buddha is

saying that the only cause for my distress is that I'm delighting in, welcoming and holding on to the source of these perceptions. What is the source of these perceptions? This is the question that Mahakaccana addresses when pressed for his understanding of the Buddha's words.

He traces the source back to the moment of sense contact which involves in my case the sound of growling, the sense of hearing and the faculty of consciousness. If I'd been deaf or unconscious the dogs could growl all they liked but I wouldn't be upset. But given those three conditions the growling sound made contact within my psyche.

Mahakaccana then says: "With contact as condition, there is feeling." We might think of feelings as purely physical. In my case, the growling might have impacted as a rough, low-pitched vibration on the eardrum. Although the sensations are physical, our mental system gets involved immediately, categorising the sensation so as to work out whether it is a threat or an opportunity. This gives us a feeling for the sensation as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. In the case of the growling dogs, my system feels the sound as unpleasant.

Mahakaccana then says: "What one feels, that one perceives." Many of those who have commented on this sutta note the grammatical change here. When describing the link between contact and feeling he used impersonal language: "With contact as condition there is feeling." But this changes once perception comes into the picture: "What one feels that one perceives." The language is now personal. This implies that the mind which categorises the sensation as growling also identifies itself as the one who feels this unpleasant sound and perceives it as growling. We have solidified both the external world and the internal world. We believe ourselves to be separate, a person who existed in the past and will exist in the future.

Although Mahakaccana doesn't spell out all the links of dependent origination for us, we can take it that we have at least gone through the links of desire and clinging when we form these perceptions based on feeling, to which he is referring here. Mahakaccana's linking of perception and clinging is very interesting to reflect upon. The vibrations resonating on the eardrum are my only real point of contact with the external world. Once the mind puts the label "growling" on these vibrations, it can split itself off from the raw experience. Unless I can hold the label very lightly as a tentative possibility, needing constant reaffirmation from each new sound, my subjective experience freezes around the label.

Fluidity is lost. A sense of self emerges in that abstract frozen world of this and that, me and you, growling and danger. If any of you have read Rob Burbea's book, *Seeing That Frees*, you'll probably remember the strong emphasis Rob also gives to the link between perception and clinging. Say we're lost in a temper tantrum. Our sense of self is strong and our perception of our adversary hardens into enmity. Later, when we calm down, we no longer feel so identified with our view and might also start to see the other person in a kinder light. The perception of enmity fades as clinging is released.

In general, Rob says, perceptions fade as clinging is released. This is a very useful phrase to contemplate and fits very neatly with Mahakaccana's teaching. Perceptions fade as clinging is released. In the case of

the growling dogs, we're seeing the opposite side of the coin, how perceptions and clinging get intertwined and lead to *dukkha*.

Some innocuous vibrations on my eardrum have conjured up a sense of self around the perception "growling." The tendency then is to stop attending to the basic vibrations and instead to withdraw into an abstract internal world where my mind can build around that label. Many commentators say that there can be feedback loops within the 12-step process described by dependent origination, and we can see a perception-based feedback loop here. The perception "growling" can now become a new input at the doorway of the mind. And if we attend to it, we have another sense contact which deepens the unpleasant feeling, tightens the clinging and goes on to generate another perception like "danger."

As Mahakaccana says, "What one perceives, that one thinks about." Thus my mind spins through a few feedback loops and finds the perception "dog" fits neatly alongside the perception "growling" and the perception "neighbour's dogs" fit with both until the jigsaw completes and the thought and image of the neighbour's dogs growling at one another establishes itself in my mind.

Now there's nothing wrong with this. It's an aspect of human intelligence to be able to build a picture of what might be happening based on snippets of sensory information. The Buddha might have interpreted vibrations on his eardrum in a similar way. We need these interpretations in order to engage with the world. The only difference between the Buddha's approach and mine is that his piecing together of perceptions would have been done out of goodwill, as a deliberate, conscious decision to engage with the world. My picture, on the other hand, was built as an automatic reaction to unacknowledged aversion for the growling sound.

Putting the pieces of the jigsaw together gives me the illusion of control. And my problem is that I get hooked on the jigsaw. I want to find new pieces to fit, see what new picture will emerge. It's this delight in jigsaw making which, according to the Buddha, keeps rekindling lust and aversion, which then underlie our quarrels with the world.

In Mahakaccana's words, "What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates." The jigsaw grows from the thought of the neighbour's dogs growling into thoughts like, are they going to start fighting? Why do they keep two dogs? What should I do? The string of thoughts based on that initial perception "growling" are now besetting me. I fitted so many jigsaw pieces together that I'm encaged by my own creation.

This process of mental proliferation is termed *papañca* in Pali. That's what this sutta is addressing. The endless chatter of the mind. The way it complicates any simple idea, elaborates on it, examines it for defects and builds a world around it. The way it fixates on an idea and projects a happy future around that. The enmity it projects onto whatever gets in the way of that idea. This is the source of all our quarrels with the world.

But all is not lost. Even though we're trapped within our monstrous jigsaw, we can train ourselves to see

that we're making and remaking the jigsaw moment after moment. Mahakaccana assures us of this when he states: "When there is the eye, a form, and eye-consciousness, it is possible to point out the manifestation of contact," and so on until "When there is the manifestation of thinking, it is possible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation."

It's the last statement which we spend most of our time working through. Being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation. For those of you who, like me, are impatient to get to those intriguing links between consciousness and contact, contact and feeling, I offer this analogy. Imagine the honey ball has a very sweet centre but is encased in a thick hard crust. We have to patiently nibble away at the crust before we can taste the sweet fruit at the centre.

Can we find in the thinking process the sense of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation? To go back to my experience of fretting about the neighbourhood dogs, if I had stopped to ask myself, are these thoughts making me happy? I would have had to admit that they were not. Why then do I keep thinking these anxious thoughts? The answer is that I feel compelled to think them. They seem important, as if the act of thinking will protect me from harm. So the description of being beset by my own thoughts is apt. When we notice thoughts in *vipassanā* and acknowledge that compulsion to keep thinking, we are nibbling at the hard crust of Mahakaccana's honey ball.

If I become aware of the thought stream about the neighbours' dogs and bring attention to the moment-to-moment experience, I will sense myself insisting on my point of view, that the dogs are growling, that this is a problem, that something awful might happen, and so on. These are the perceptions and notions that are besetting me.

The practice, as we know, is to bring attention to the body, letting the thoughts come and go without latching onto them. The growling sounds, my basic point of contact in the world, might seem distant, behind an impenetrable barrier, inaccessible. It's as if there's an explosion of energy keeping me away from that basic sense contact. I feel frightened, fragmented, in my head, separate from my bodily experience, from hearing and all sense contact. This is hardly surprising, as the self I believe myself to be is just one piece of the jigsaw being created from these perceptual feedback loops.

For example, the thought "this is a problem I need to fix" could be very true and pressing. How is the thought experienced? Sometimes thoughts seem very light and fleeting and an analogy often used is that of clouds passing through the sky. But as I attempt to look at a very pressing thought like this, the cloud refuses to pass by. Instead, it envelops me. My mind fixates around it. It becomes gospel. It's as if myself and the thought are enclosed within a bright bubble, defending ourselves against a hostile world. It's a very uncomfortable experience, both physically and mentally, being stuck in this bubble.

As I let attention dwell on the experience, the bubble starts to dissolve and emotions like anger or sadness may emerge. Various components of the thought come more to the fore. At one stage, it may be the concept "problem". I might feel myself insisting that there really is a problem. At another stage the notion

"I need" might become predominant as I feel the anxiety behind neediness. Or it could be the notion "fix" that looms large in imagination as I feel myself grasping after a perfect world.

At this stage I can acknowledge the truth of what Mahākākāna says about being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation. Notions like "fix" and "need" have my life history of self-chatter embedded within them. Every time I repeat a thought like "I need to do this or get that", I'm adding to the pressure inside all future thought bubbles with the phrase "I need". Whenever I paint a picture of how rosy the world will be once I get this or that right, I'm also adding to this pressure. The notions "need" and "fix" and all other components of the thought are like landmines I create by mental proliferation. They lie waiting in consciousness till tread upon by some innocent bit of sense contact.

This is what the Buddha was pointing to when he explained, "Bhikkhu, as to the source by which perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man, if nothing is found there to delight in, welcome and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust, aversion and so on."

It is the fact that we delight in mental chatter that causes all our problems. Each chat solidifies our hold on whatever notions and perceptions underlie it. Notions like "this is a problem" and its partner "I must fix this" would be favourites for most of us. You could probably name your own top ten notions which underlie most of your internal chatter.

We do, however, get moments when the emotional turmoil burns out and we feel less beset by thoughts. Instead of just saying "phew, I'm glad that's over" and drifting into a dreamy state of relief, we can maintain our investigative stance and see can we tease out any deeper nourishment from our honey ball. Can we look at the process of thinking from this calmer perspective to see how it comes about? Can we detect the desire to link perceptions together to form thoughts?

In my experience, perceptions are accompanied by a bright bubble of light in my mind and I get a little pop of satisfaction when a small mental bubble merges with another one. What was a vague notion now becomes more defined and the sense of self more solid. This is to study Mahākākāna's statement: "With the manifestation of perception, it is possible to point out the manifestation of thought."

If I watch carefully, I'll notice that the pop of satisfaction is short-lived. The bubbles keep deflating. The sense of certainty dissolves with them. Seeing this over and over persuades me to resist the urge towards certainty and definition, to try to make peace with a world that is constantly changing, undefinable. Many emotions may surface as I come to terms with truth in this exercise. Grief, anger, fear, shame. But the draw towards truth holds the inquiring mind in situ, and faith helps me relax deeper into the experience, trusting that the path to peace is being formed as I bear with these emotions.

Say, for example, I identify my emotional state as fear. Bringing attention to the body, I register unpleasant physical sensations and tensions. Alongside these, I might detect pulses of intense fear which push a description of what's happening into my head, insisting that the situation is horrid. What I'm

experiencing according to Mahākākāna is the manifestation of perception. "When there is the manifestation of feeling, it is possible to point out the manifestation of perception." Unpleasant feelings are there as a background and those little pushing sensations, the fleeting insistence that the situation is horrid, are momentary manifestations of perception. My mind splits itself off from what is thought of as horrid.

In time, though, my psyche relaxes from this insistence and attention dwells more continuously in the body. Although the sensations haven't changed, if I had to describe them, I might call them rough, pinching, jagged, stinging. But these labels no longer seem relevant. The mind stops bothering to categorise experience, to take meaning from it, to complicate it. It lets the roughness be rough. It lets the stinging sensations sting. Although these are still recognised as unpleasant, feeling them fully like this is less stressful than the continual popping of mental bubbles and the effort to separate off from experience to find myself as somehow outside of it all.

Sometimes this less stressful experience is so puzzling that it brings up the deeper fear of living in a world I cannot comprehend. But if conditions are right, I'll be able to trust to this unusual view of experience and start to make sense of it. I'll notice that the decreased stress is due to the fact that my interpretation of reality isn't centred around the notion of being a separate person. Sensations and feelings are known, felt, but there's no interpretation of these as happening to some entity called me. They're just coming and going of their own accord. The knowing of them is not centred around any point where I usually locate me, the knower. Its origin and extent are outside of experience, beyond the range of perception. Acknowledging the vast unknown within which my small world spins brings a deep sense of peace.

Linked to this, we have the final part of Mahākākāna's teaching: "When there is no eye, no form and no eye consciousness, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of contact. And so on until, when there is no manifestation of thinking, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation."

This parallels the Buddha's advice from the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta when he asks us to notice the mind without lust, the mind without hate and so on. We are to notice what is not happening. This is not usually our habit but a very rich practice indeed. Again, we have to start by nibbling at the outer crust of this honey ball, acknowledging times when our minds are not beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation. Whenever you feel yourself somewhat calm, interested in the sensations of breathing or walking for example, acknowledge how the absence of thought is contributing to that sense of calm.

A word of warning. Absences can be hard to acknowledge. It is said that nature abhors a vacuum and as soon as the mind notices an absence it tends to fill it with lots of thoughts. No need to worry. This is part of the purification process. It's a manifestation of our fear of living in a world we cannot fully comprehend. Rather than work through that fear, we attach ourselves to thought. We even love thinking about our woes. What would become of us if we couldn't remember our failings and regrets, our disappointments

and our worries? When that gets too much, we change tack and start thinking out new plans, new strategies for making ourselves happy. These and other mental habits often surge in to fill the gap we notice at that blessed moment of not being beset by our thoughts. Bearing with this and reflecting on the possibility, and occasional reality, of not thinking, loosens our attachment to these stories, encourages us to live a more embodied life.

In deeper meditations we may get the chance to study the other absences Mahākākāna mentions and see that thoughts cannot form without perception, that perceptions only form when there is feeling and in the absence of sense contact that feelings cannot form. At the most profound level we might even get a glimpse of sense contact emerging as we bring attention into one or other of the sense doors to detect a signal from the outside world.

At one level the exercise seems academic. Who cares whether feelings can only register based on sense contact? How does that help me cope with the challenges in life? One answer to this is that the exercise itself is purifying. Contemplating the possibility of living for even a moment without perception shows us how deeply attached we are to our way of seeing the world. We purify ourselves as we bear with the pain of attachment, the anger and grief that shows up as our minds probe this border to our understanding.

But do remember that there's nothing wrong with perception. It's a vital part of our intelligence. It's only attachment to perception that does the damage. When we dare to let go of needing to always see things my way we slide into a mysterious harmony. Our being is content and at ease as within an indescribable universe. We lose our desire to describe ourselves in any way that can be contained within the phenomenal world.

These moments also help us understand the Buddha's somewhat puzzling phrase in his address to Daṇḍapāni: "Perceptions do not underlie the Brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures." In these moments of peace we are experiencing a fluid world where categories like "this" and "that" are not absolute but changing, dissolving, reforming in line with the constantly changing sensory stream. The sense of me is not defined by our present mood or our roles or by any measure we can make of our skills or behaviour. We don't bother defining what is indefinable. To use the Buddha's phrase, perceptions do not underlie our being.

We become more willing to experience life at the level of sensation and feeling and may even see how these come into being moment after moment. The beauty of this simple, fluid level of reality shows us that our dreams and worries are irrelevant, burdensome, unskillful. Although these moments of deep insight are only temporary, they give us hope. Our faith in the Dhamma is strengthened and when the self comes back to impose its will on the world, it is not quite so dictatorial, more ready to listen, to negotiate, to appreciate the kindness and wisdom on offer from the world. With a lighter heart we can pass over many grievances and see the wisdom of accepting the imperfections of the world, working with people, not against them. Eventually the Buddha assures us we will come to the end of quarrels, brawls, disputes,

recrimination, malice and false speech. "Here these evil, unwholesome states cease without remainder."

In summary then, the Honeyball Sutta describes the Dhamma in terms of its ultimate goal of perfect peace. This is a broad-sweep overview of the Buddha's vision for his followers. The Sutta also pinpoints why we don't experience this peace, describing how we delight in and attach to our perceptions and especially the perception of ourselves as a separate substantial entity at the centre of our world. Attachment to perception leads on to thoughts which eventually weave a net to ensnare us within a painful, confining world of self-definition.

The ultimate peace comes when we no longer attach to perceptions, no longer get fooled into finding our essence within anything that can be pinpointed, named, defined or in any way bound within the confines of the mind and body.

So let's use our meditation time wisely. Now and again we might be troubled by the barking of the dogs nearby or other sounds. Can we feel any underlying emotions? Can we feel the urge to *papañca*? To embroider and complicate every idea, go over and back on it, defend its flaws, embellish our point of view. Can we sense how we create a world out of all this papañca? Similarly, if you're captivated by the dragonflies hovering over the pond, can you detect the urge to amplify the experience, to tell someone about it, to dig a pond in your own garden? Does all this thinking add to the beauty of the experience or detract from it?

In moments of ease, can we acknowledge the absence of thinking? Can we see how perceptions fade as clinging is released? Can we detect the peace on offer when we are not blowing up so many mental bubbles? Is that peace founded upon perception? Is it mine? Is there even a me?

May our meditation help us to break through the tough crust of *papañca* and be nourished by the honey ball of the Dhamma.

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