Perceptions & Obsessions

May 31, 2014

We chant that reflection on the requisites every night because we tend to be obsessed about the requisites—food, clothing, shelter, medicine—but we can’t live without them. So the reflections teach us how to relate to these things without being obsessed, how to know how much food is just what we need, how much clothing, shelter, medicine. Enough food to give us strength to practice. Enough clothing to protect the body from heat and from cold. And as I say, to cover the parts that cause shame, although it seems now more and more people have no shame about anything. Enough medicine to keep off pains, to keep off illness. That’s enough. This is helpful in several ways. It helps with the practice so you’re not obsessed about tomorrow’s food or tomorrow’s clothing or shelter. One of the nice things about being a monk is you never have to wonder about what to wear. At the same time, the Buddha is not telling us to deprive ourselves. As he says, “Any pleasure that accords with the Dhamma he has no criticism.” You have to look at the effect that it has on the mind. This is where the issue of obsession comes in. There’s a list of seven obsessions altogether, but three of them are really important. They relate to feelings. There’s passion for pleasant feelings. There’s resistance to painful feelings. There’s ignorance around neutral feelings. The word here is anusaya for obsession. Sometimes it’s translated as underlying tendency, but that relates more to the derivation of the word than its actual usage. Anusaya relates to lying down. So they think about underlying tendencies. But actually, when they say that you lie down with a particular attitude or a particular feeling, you’re just getting obsessed with it. You’re blind about it. So what we try to do is bring some light to our relationship to pleasure and pain and to neutral feelings. The neutral feelings are the ones we don’t really notice. That’s why ignorance is the problem. We run from pleasure to pain and pain to pleasure and don’t spend much time stopping off at the neutral feelings. They don’t seem to have anything to offer. But actually they can be a good help if you pay attention to them. And the same with pleasure and pain. If you learn how to pay attention to what’s going on, not only to the actual pleasure or pain, but also to the other mental events that go around them. Think of the word sannya. Of the various aggregates, sannya is the one that Ajaan Fuang would focus most often on. He’d say, “This is a real problem. It’s our perceptions of things, the labels we give to things, that can cause a lot of trouble. If the label is imbued with obsession, then you blind yourself.” Again, sannyas are things that can cause a lot of trouble. They’re things that we have to use. If we didn’t have some perceptions or some recognition of things, we wouldn’t know what was happening. So one way we train our perceptions is to read the Dhamma so we can recognize what different things are happening in the mind. What’s a sankhara? What’s a sannya? What’s a feeling? A vedana? It’s good to be able to have a vocabulary for this, to tease things out. It’s the same with the vocabulary for the properties in the body. There’s earth, water, wind, fire, which to us sounds like ancient or medieval chemistry. But the Buddha’s talking about something else here. He’s talking about the qualities of having a physical presence, so that you know that you have a body here. What is it about what you’re experiencing right now that tells you you’ve got a body sitting here right now? Well, there’s the warmth of the body and there’s the energy flow. That’s fire and wind. There’s the sense of solidity and there’s the coolness that comes around. That’s liquidity. And it’s useful to have that vocabulary so we can sort these things out. That’s one way you train your perceptions. And the other way, of course, is to look at when you have a particular perception in mind. What does it do? What associations does it pull up? Because a lot of our perceptions, of course, come from the past. We’ve recognized things in the past and we just bring that particular label to bear on things here and now. But the question is, is it the appropriate label? Is it useful? What does it do to the mind to hold on to that perception? Say, when you’re dealing with pain, what kind of perceptions do you have around the pain? Do you visualize the pain as something doing something to you? Is it a malevolent presence? Then you have to ask yourself, does the pain have a particular intention? It doesn’t have any intentions at all. It’s just there. If anything, it’s your intentions that are messing with it. What happens if you change the perception around it? First you question as to what actual perceptions you have, and then see what you can do to change them. And Jhammahabhura recommends that you start out with asking the question, “Is the pain the same thing as the part of the body where you feel it?” And the answer is no. This is where the properties come in. Is the pain water? Well, no. Is it wind? No. Is it fire? No. Is it solidity? No. Then why do you mix it up with the body? It’s a sensation there, but it’s a different kind of sensation. If you can see the distinction between the two things, you get so you can be okay with having the pain there. Because you realize they’re separate things. Then there’s the awareness, the consciousness that is aware of these things. You have to ask yourself, is it the same thing as water, wind, or fire? No. Is it the same thing as feeling? No. There’s nothing about consciousness, pure and simple, that’s either pleasant or painful or any of these things. You’re trying to use this vocabulary so you can tease things out and start taking apart things that your perceptions have clumbed together. In other words, you’re giving yourself new perceptions that cause a lot less trouble. So this is one of the reasons why it is useful to read some of the Dhamma. To get that kind of vocabulary, it’s like learning how to be a taster. They teach you all kinds of words to describe all kinds of tastes, all kinds of flavors. And as a result, you become more sensitive to slight variations in things. Well, it’s the same with learning about your mind. You have to look at your perceptions because they’re causing you trouble. Ajahn Suwat had an interesting comment on the word perception. He related it to a time meaning for perception, which means an agreement. This is part of the mind’s sign language, which it sends messages to itself. And there’s a certain agreement. You hear the word pain? There are certain parts of your mind that get all worked up. It’s like waving a flag. People get all worked up around the flag. Well, the word pain comes through the message system in your brain, and there are parts that are going to react. So try a different perception, try a different label, and question some of those agreements in the mind. This means that, and that means this. As Ajahn Chah says, a lot of these agreements in the mind are just purely arbitrary. You could agree on all kinds of different things. As he said, we have paper money that everybody’s agreed is money. It’s not really money, but people agree to use it like money. Of course, we don’t have much of that anywhere now. We have credit cards and internet currency. We could even take chicken dung and decide that that’s money. People would be fighting one another over a chicken dung. It’s like the woman who went to see Ajahn Umpuen. She took him a papa. The papa is those trees with money hanging from them. Apparently, this was the first time in his life that he’d ever seen paper money. He’d spent all of his life up in the forests of northern Thailand, Burma, southern China, northern Laos, northern Vietnam. He’d never seen paper money in his life before. So he comes out and he sees the paper money. So he goes up and looks at it and says, “Oh, nice pictures of the king.” And he looks at it one side and the other. And he says, “Umpuen, Umpuen, you can’t touch that. It’s money.” He says, “It’s not money, it’s paper.” The woman had taken that and she and her husband had been killing people over this stuff. And she realized, “Oh my gosh, I’ve been killing people over this.” And she just says, “It’s paper.” That’s a lot of what happens with our perceptions. We kill all kinds of things. If we don’t kill other people, we can kill our goodness over certain perceptions, just because we’ve agreed that this event means that and that event means this. It’s our arbitrary internal language. And it’s good to see it as arbitrary. You can pull away from it to some extent and not be quite so obsessed. If a certain pain comes in the body, you think, “Oh my gosh, there it is. My leg is going to fall off. I’m going to be crippled for life.” All these other stories that the mind can create around that perception, we’ll learn how to question it. A lot of these perceptions are related to our past experiences of pleasure and pain. This is why it’s good to have the pleasure of concentration to pull you out of sensual pleasure, sensual pains, so you can look at them with a little bit more clarity. It’s interesting when the Buddha talks about obsessions in feelings. He says, “When you get into the states of jhana, the obsession doesn’t happen.” In other words, you have the pleasure and it doesn’t blind you. You’re not lying down with it. You’re sitting on it and you’re looking at it with at least some clarity. Often we’re told that you have to be leery of the pleasure of concentration because you’re going to get attached to it. Well, that’s the whole point. You want to get attached to this so that you can detach yourself from your sensual pleasures. Because this is a lot clearer. It doesn’t have that same quality of obsession. People don’t kill one another over jhana. But they do over sensual passions. So try to get the mind into concentration so you can step back from these things and begin to see how arbitrary your system of perceptions is. Loosen things up a bit in the mind so you can be clearer about your passions, clearer about your pleasures. Recognize passion for what it is, that it’s a problem. Recognize resistance as a problem. Recognize the ways in which you’ve been ignorant around neutral feelings. That’s a problem, too. You want to bring knowledge to these things. That’s how you turn them into a path. For a lot of us, our knowledge is our perception, so you’ve got to learn how to shake them loose a little bit. Ask yourself which perceptions are actually useful and which ones are not. It’s when you take things apart in this way that you begin to see, and it’s when you see that you can let go of things that you didn’t realize you were holding onto.

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