Using Perceptions

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Perception, the Pali word is sannyā. The Buddha compared it to mirages. They have an appearance of reality, and in some cases they do reflect things that are further away. But they can’t be distorted. And you go to where you think the perception is, or think the object is, and it’s not there. They talk about fathomorgana, view up to the far north, nod to what they call lenses in the atmosphere, which will create images of islands, mountains, that are simply not there. However, it’s these perceptions that we have to use as the Buddha said, “These are the things that shape our minds.” Even concentration. It’s a perception attainment all the way up through the dimension of nothingness. So we have to learn how to use our perceptions and not get deceived by them. Remembering that every perception is a sketch. Just thinking about your body here right now. Could you have a perception that would encompass all of the atoms, all of the chemicals, all of the chemical interactions, the firing of the synapses? No one perception could hold all those things. So the question is, what perception would be useful right now? We use the perception of the breath. And the Buddhist perception of the breath may not be what our original perception is. But it’s good to learn how to use this vocabulary. Because what he provides us with is sketches that are useful. Like the sketch of the body, breathing in, breathing out, and being permeable. It’s the breath energy that runs through all of the organs of the body. We can make use of that perception. As you breathe in, think of the whole body breathing in. Think of the whole body breathing out. And then ask yourself, what sensations do you have that would correspond to those perceptions? I’ve known people who say, “Well, it’s very unscientific.” There’s no breath in your nerves. There’s no breath in your blood vessels. But they’re thinking of breath as the movement of air. Or so for the Buddha, it’s the movement of energy. And you want to take advantage of that, that there is a sense of movement of energy. Some parts of the body, the movement is clearer than in other parts. But take advantage of that, that you can sense it. In some places. Because then you want to adjust your breath so that it’s comfortable. That’s the other mental fabrication that shapes your mind, feelings. Adjust your breath so that there’s a sense of ease. And then you can think of that easeful breath connecting with the other breath energies in the body. That allows you to settle in. That’s one perception you can use. I knew someone in Thailand one time who had the ability to get very quickly into concentration. She said it was by imagining that there was one spot in her brain and one spot in her tailbone. And there was a line connecting the two of them. And she focused on the two. That pulled all of her thoughts into that line. So she could be anchored in the body. And have a sense of feeling solidly here. As she said, if she imagined only one spot, it was hard to not to think around that spot. It’s as if you had one hand full, but the other hand was free to grasp whatever came by. But if both hands were full, having to keep two spots in mind at once, it was hard to think. Much easier just to stay still. Because then it may not be a line connecting the brain to the tailbone. Of course there’s the nerve, or the nerves going down the spine. But you can use perceptions like this to help the mind settle in. Even though it’s a sketch, it’s a useful sketch. What this means, of course, is that whatever we perceive is going to be colored by the perceptions we bring to it. And it is possible to change your perceptions. One of the most unhelpful teachings I heard was a couple years back. I’ve been told by her teacher that you can’t change your perceptions at all. Whatever you’re born with, you’re stuck with those perceptions. Well, if that were the case, we’d never be able to learn anything new. And the Buddha wouldn’t have taught us the perceptions of inconstantly stressed not-self. He wouldn’t have taught us the perceptions of concentration. Because we wouldn’t be able to learn them. But we can learn them. We can change our perceptions. But that means we have to have a somewhat detached attitude to all our perceptions. First to get detached from our old perceptions, the ones that have been tying us down. This is one of the reasons why we shouldn’t be in any hurry to change the Dhamma to fit in with our perceptions. Of the world. Because after all, our perceptions of the world are the ones that accompany our lack of skill in approaching the issue of suffering. So we should really learn how to step back from them a bit. This is why it’s helpful to think of coming to the Dhamma sometimes as going to a new country, where the customs are different, the language is different, but it’s just as legitimate, or if not more legitimate, than the customs you came from. Be willing to try on those new perceptions, new customs, for size. Ultimately, of course, even the perceptions that the Buddha recommends are things you have to let go. But you use them in the meantime. Perceptions of concentration to help the mind to settle down. The three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. Use those to see the drawbacks of things that would pull you out of concentration. Here’s the word inconstancy here for anicca. Sometimes it’s translated as impermanent. But that doesn’t get you there. Meaning of the word in the language. It also doesn’t get to the simple fact that if you say something is impermanent, then the Buddha tries to draw from that the conclusion that it’s stressful. Not all impermanent things are stressful. If you have a disease and it’s impermanent, well it’s good, because it’s going to end. But if you think about the health of your body as being inconstant, that’s what the anicca means. Anicca means constant. Anicca means inconstant. Then you realize it’s unreliable. And when something’s unreliable, yes, it is stressful. That’s the second perception. You’re trying to find happiness in things that are unreliable, you’re going to suffer. So the conclusion the Buddha has you draw is, is this worth regarding as yourself, as belonging to you, or as being? And the answer is no. So first you apply these perceptions to anything that would pull you out of concentration, to see their drawbacks. This is part of that five-step program that the Buddha recommends for getting past anything that’s an obstacle. You see its origination. In other words, you see what causes it, and you’re looking for the cause inside the mind. And then you look to see it pass away, to realize that it’s not something constant. A lot of our defilements threaten us that way. They say, “I may be weak right now, but if you don’t give in to me, I’m going to get stronger and stronger until you explode.” That’s just a threat. If you really look at these things, you see they come and then they go. They come again and they go again. Now we can build up some pressure around them by the way we breathe. But if you learn to see the thought as one thing and perceive the breathing energy in the body as something else, you realize you don’t have to conflate those two things. And you don’t have to build up pressure around them as they come and go. That helps you step back from them. And when you step back from them, then you’re going to ask, “What’s the allure?” Here again, you have perceptions. The perceptions that tell you that greed is good, anger is good, or maybe this case of greed is good, this case of anger is good. Jealousy, fear, envy. This part of the mind that likes these things, that feeds on them. What’s the perception that makes them glamorous? What’s the perception that makes them attractive? How much truth is there to that perception? And what good does it do? That’s the important thing. There may be some truth to certain things that you find attractive, but is that truth useful? Remember the Buddha’s instructions for speech, that you would speak out loud. Is it true? Is it beneficial? And is this the right time and place? Well, that should apply to your perceptions as well. And as you know, every perception is somewhat of a distortion, it’s just a sketch. But sometimes you can think of perceptions as being like maps. If you had a map that was totally, or that totally would provide information for the territory that it covers, it would have so many details that it would be useless. If you want a map of roads, you need to look for a map of roads. If you want a map of elevation contours, we get a different map. If you want a map of vegetation, a map of minerals, there are maps that provide these things. They show you only one aspect or two aspects of the area you’re covering, and you want to make sure that that particular aspect is accurate. Then you ask yourself, well, even if it’s accurate, is this beneficial for me, for what I want? If you’re looking for the road to go someplace, but you get a map that shows you the mineral deposits around here, it wouldn’t be helpful. It’d be true, but it wouldn’t be beneficial. So you look for a map, an inner map, a mental map that is true and beneficial. You see here, you’ve got the Allura, and it may be true, maybe it is true that this state of mind does have those attractive features, but is it really helpful for you? Is it really good for you? In which case you want to look for other maps, other perceptions. And this is where the Buddha brings in inconstancy, stress, not-self. In fact, there are eleven perceptions in one of his suttas, of the drawbacks of things. Things are alien, empty, a cancer. An arrow. So look at the perceptions you’re holding in mind, and see where they have their drawbacks. Make that your map, and then you can free yourself from your attachment to a lot of unskillful things. Then, of course, you have to put the map aside. As the Buddha said, all fabrications are inconstant, all fabrications are stressful. But when you’re working on concentration, you don’t apply that map quite yet to the concentration itself. Otherwise you say, “Oh, concentration comes and it goes, well I learned that, check that box.” But you haven’t really gained the benefit that you could from concentration. So use the map that says concentration is worth doing. Until you’ve mastered it. And then you start looking for the drawbacks. And you apply the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to the concentration, and even to right view. So that you can be freed from all fabrications. And then you have to put those perceptions down, because after all, they’re aggregates. They’re fabrications. When the Buddha says, “sabbe dhamma anatta,” all phenomena are not-self, that phrase itself is a phenomenon. It means that too, it should be let go. This is why these perceptions are especially useful. Because they teach you to let go all around. But you don’t start out with them. And John Lee talks about this. He says all too many people come to the Dhamma and they want to go straight to the three perceptions. But then they don’t have anything. They’ve let go of everything. They’ve let go of the path, before the path has even been developed. So I can’t take them anywhere. So that comes down to the issue of when the perceptions have their time and place. That’s what you want to learn. What perceptions are true and beneficial and timely right now. Learn how to use those. Which means, again, that you have to have some distance from your perceptions. Step back and look at them as activities. So you can judge what kind of perceptions are useful for you right now, which ones are causing you trouble. If you latch on to them. As Buddha says, “This is the truth, this is the only truth, and everything else is worthless.” That ties you down. You can’t step back and gain some freedom and insight into this process of perception. Which means you can’t change your perceptions when the time comes when they need to be changed. So see them as tools. See them as part of your inner speech. Remember the rules of inner speech. True, beneficial, timely. View them as sketches. When you’ve arrived at where you need to go, then you can put the maps down.

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