Question Your Perceptions

December 1, 2021

When you study the rules in the vinaya, you see the huge role that perception plays in determining offenses. You see a little black spot on the sidewalk, and you think it’s just a little black spot, and you step on it. You perceive it as just a black spot. If it turns out it was a bug, the fact that you didn’t perceive it as a bug means there’s no offense. But it costens you. Your perceptions are not necessarily reliable. You want to look carefully. As we get into the mind, we find also that perceptions are really important. You want to learn how to perceive things as correctly as possible. The problem is our perceptions are like cartoon sketches. There’s no way they can replicate all of reality. As the Buddha said, they’re like mirages. They emphasize a few aspects of what’s out there, but there’s very little substance there. And there are a lot of things they miss, a lot of things they can distort. So as you’re focusing on the breath, try to notice what kind of perceptions you use. What do you perceive in the process of breathing? How does it happen? And what kind of perceptions help you settle down? As the Buddha said, perception is a metal fabrication. It has an impact on the mind. What ways of perceiving the breath have a good impact on the breath and have a good impact on the mind? You want to test them out. And Ajaan Lee’s explorations of the breath energies in the body are very helpful. And you look at his different teachings. First there’s the description in Method Two, which talks about the breath energies doing certain things. But then you go through his Dhamma talks and you find he has the breath doing other things as well, which means that he continued to explore and he continued to try things out. So try out different perceptions. Perceive the breath as originating outside, coming in. Perceive it as originating in the body and then radiating out in such a way as the breath to pull the air in as you breathe in. Perceive it as originating in different spots of the body and see what is best for right now. Or you can perceive every cell in the body as breathing. Try to give them all equal weight. See what that does. Admittedly, there’s a difference between these two, but they’re sketches with a purpose. And as you’re practicing concentration, you want to get really clear about what your perceptions are, because as you develop insight, they’re going to play a huge role as well. The four satchanas will talk often about how, with all the five aggregates, you don’t have to analyze all five at once. Choose one. And as you get to really get to know that one, that knowledge spreads to the others. I think it was Ajahn Chah who said that his own efforts at gaining discernment really got going when he started looking into this issue of perception and seeing how arbitrary they are and how much they depend on our desires. When Ajahn Mahaprabhu said that he was able to really get a handle on body contemplation, again, it was an issue of perception. He’d gotten really good at seeing the body as unattractive, taking it apart. Think of all the blood flowing through the body. He’d look at a human body, and the first thing he would see was it falling apart. It seemed to be automatic. And there was no lust at all. But then the question came. Was lust really gone, or was it just hiding? There would have been no single event that would let him know that lust was done with for sure. So he tested it. He decided to switch his perceptions to see a beautiful body. And so for four days he worked and worked and worked at getting this. He saw a beautiful body right next to his. And there was no sign of any interest, no sign of any lust. Until the fourth day. And there was just a little bit of a stirring. It wasn’t physical, it was just a mental stirring that he liked this beautiful body, which was a sign that the lust was still there. What was he going to do? He’d go back and forth to perceive it as ugly, unattractive, falling apart, oozing all kinds of horrible stuff, filled with diseases, and then going back to attractive. And he saw that the issue was not the body, it was the perceptions and the desires that those perceptions served. That, he said, finally led to the insight that got him past that issue. So look at your perceptions, look at your labels, look at your images, and realize that your view of reality is pretty sketchy. So when you have a perception of things, ask what purpose it serves. Now you have some in there, some perceptions of the mind that got lodged in there from events in the past. They’re really unhealthy, and you have to learn how to question them. Try to use other perceptions in their place and see which parts of the mind fight, resist, hold on to the old perceptions. That’s one really good way of getting to see where your defilements are. As the Buddha said, craving, when it arises, has a location. And many times we’re confused as to what the location is. We think we’re attracted to a particular person, say. It turns out we’re attracted to the perception, and the perception is attractive because it serves a particular purpose, it fits in with a particular fantasy we may have. So often you find that the craving is actually three or four removes, or its location is three or four removes from what we think the object is. And the best way to fight your old, unskillful perceptions is to apply some new ones. This is why the Buddha has you analyze the body, those thirty-two parts, or to think of all the diseases that you have in the body. He says there’s a reference to diseases in the eye. He’s not saying that there’s a disease in the eye. He’s saying that the eye is a disease. Your ear is a disease. All the different parts of your body are a disease. It’s ready to malfunction. We think we’ve gotten such a good thing when we’ve got this body. And it is useful for certain things, but you’ve got to be very clear about what it’s good for. And what other things it may be actually bad for the mind if you hold onto the body. We’ve talked in the past about negative body images and positive body images, and both kinds can be either healthy or unhealthy. A healthy negative image is seeing that everybody has a negative image. It’s made of these same things. And so any craving to come back and have another human body has to be called into question. The unhealthy negative image, of course, is when you see that other people have beautiful bodies and yours is an ugly body. Which is why it’s good to think about any possible body, all the things they have inside, all the diseases they’re subject to, what happens to them as they age, what happens to them as they die and decay. It’s a great leveler. That makes you question whether you’ve got such a good deal after all, getting this body. As for the positive image, the unhealthy positive image is that you’re attractive and you can use your attractive features to get other people to do what you want. There’s a lot of pride that goes with that, but it’s a very unstable pride. Because as you get older, you have to have people keep reaffirming that you are as attractive as you were. And when you think that you’re attractive, it’s very easy to get seduced. I was reading one time about a conversation between a French actor and a French actress about seduction. And the actor was saying that beautiful women are a lot easier to seduce than women who are not, because they want to be told. They believe already that they’re attractive, but they have to believe that they don’t so that it’s good to be reaffirmed. Whereas women who know that they’re not attractive, if you come on to them, this actor said, they think you’re being ridiculous. So that’s a case where having a positive body image of that sort can really get you into trouble. The healthy positive image is that the body is useful for doing good things. What makes human life good is the goodness we can do and who we’ve got a body that can do that. And so when you see that that’s the goodness of the body, then the question of what is good food to eat, what is a good exercise regime, what is a good way to take care of the body, gets very different from what it would have been if you said, “Well, I want the body to be attractive.” So realize that the Buddha teaches healthy positive image and a healthy negative image. And it also takes some of his strong medicine to fight the negative unhealthy image and the negative positive image, because these things are really firmly entrenched. After all, this is why we got born in the human realm. In the Buddhist analysis, the reason that we’re attracted to other people is that we’re first attracted to ourselves. And if we die and we still have that issue of attraction, it’s going to lead us to who knows where. It’s going to be a big obstacle. So look at the drawbacks of having a body, all the diseases that they have, what happens to them as they age, how they’re treated. How they’re subject to accidents. It’s really a precarious thing, having a body. Use those thoughts to develop some heedfulness. And turn around and look at your perceptions and ask yourself, “How many times have you been fooled by your perceptions?” Learn to see them as arbitrary. Learn to see them as cartoon sketches. We’re often so impressed by how accurate our perceptions are of the world. Yet there’s so much we don’t know. We were talking today about birdsong. There’s a lot about many birdsongs we hear only part of, and our ears are not even quick enough to hear how quick a birdsong can be. What sounds like a squawk of lots of different notes all at once is actually an arpeggio. It’s just one little thing. Our perception of birdsongs is pretty skewed. But that doesn’t apply just to birdsongs. It applies to everything that we do in life. We’ve got perceptions that rule our opinions on things. They serve certain purposes, and they serve some purposes well. But then they can get in your way. Take, for instance, the question of your mind right now. What direction is your mind facing? Because our eyes face forward, we have the idea that our minds are also facing forward. When you close your eyes, there’s no need to think that the mind is facing any direction at all. We know we have a body. But you can also perceive that there’s a direction just space here. You’re not using the body to move around right now. Things can be very still. If you get the breath really, really still, the sense of the outline of the body can begin to disappear. That is a perception you can let go of. So it’s useful for some things, but it’s also good to learn how to put these perceptions aside because they help the mind settle down. They allow you to question the perceptions that give rise to greed, aversion, and delusion, and the perceptions that serve the purposes of greed, aversion, and delusion. As you call them into question, you find that opens up a lot of understanding inside. That’s a good aggregate to focus on. This is key to a lot of our defilements. There are perceptions that provoke the defilements, and there are defilements that provoke certain perceptions. And when you can call the perceptions into question, you can call those defilements into question as well.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2021/211201_Question_Your_Perceptions.mp3>