

The Karma of Perception

October 14, 2010

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha's explaining the different aggregates and he gives examples for each. The examples for perception and consciousness are very similar. In terms of perception, you recognize what you see: blue, red, yellow, whatever. Whereas with consciousness, you recognize what you taste: sweet, sour, bitter. And it's not the case that perception happens only at the eye, and consciousness only at the tongue.

I think the point he's getting at is that just as your sense of vision is a more active sense than your sense of taste, in the same way, perception is more active than consciousness. Both of them are active, there's an element of intention in each. But consciousness is what basically receives sensory input, and perception is what then creates a world out of it, focuses on what's important, puts aside what's not. All the mind's activities in terms of recognizing a figure against a ground: That's the activity of perception.

Think about the difference between sight and taste. With sight, it's not just a matter of registering visual imprints. You actively create a three-dimensional world out of what you see. They tell of people who have been blind from birth who undergo an operation that gives them sight, and they find it very confusing, because their brains haven't learned how to handle all that input. Many of them end up putting on dark glasses so that they don't have to bother with their visual field. It's really a learned function of the mind, something you have to develop.

And the same when you meditate: Perception is something you really have to develop. Consciousness is pretty much there. It's just a matter of directing it to the sense of the body, but then what you perceive makes all the difference.

The first thing you want to learn how to perceive is the sensation of the breath, learning how to recognize which of the sensations of the body correspond to the breath. For people who have grown up in a culture where they're taught about breath energy throughout their body, it's a lot easier because they've learned how to recognize different sensations as breath sensations in the body. For those of us who haven't, it's a learned skill but it's something you can develop, sensitizing yourself to the sense of motion or energy throughout the body.

Now, there are two kinds of motion. There's the motion of the blood through your blood vessels and then there's the motion of the breath, and they're two different things. Because the blood pushes up against the walls of the vessels, there

can a sense of blockage sometimes, a sense of running up against something, a feeling of pressure; whereas breath really is very free-flowing. You want to develop that perception in mind. It might be a mental image, or just something you tell yourself: “Breath can flow anywhere, through anything.” Then look for the sensations that correspond to that. They’re there. It may take you a while to get sensitive to them, but the time spent in learning how to develop this perception is time well spent.

Then you can work on perceiving the other elements. Fire would be the warmth. You could think of water as being cool; earth as being heavy, solid. Then there’s space. And then there’s the awareness of all these things. These are all elements, they’re all *dhatu*, and they’re a useful set of perceptions to have. When you’re feeling lightheaded, you can focus on the heavy, earth-like sensations in the body, to bring things into balance. When you’re feeling too warm or too cold, you can focus on whichever element will bring things back into balance. But earth can also get really heavy and oppressive, and water and fire can also get out of control sometimes. When you have a fever, you might want to think of getting things cool and you actually make it worse.

So you have to be very careful in how you focus on these perceptions and sensations. The breath is the one that’s most useful. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you focus on breathing from the beginning. It’s also one of the elements most responsive to the image you hold in your mind, and it’s also a good mirror for the mind itself.

This practice in perception is useful both for the sake of getting the mind into concentration and also for dealing with other issues as you go through life. You get more and more sensitive to how the way you process things determines how you experience things. You see someone who looks attractive, and the mind immediately slaps certain perceptions on that person. It all happens so quickly, it all seems so natural, that you think, “That’s the way that person is. That person’s attractive.” You forget the extent to which you’ve learned your ideas about what’s attractive, and you forget the extent to which, when you’re applying those ideas, you’re ignoring a lot of other things that are going on, both in your own mind and also in what’s actually there, the object that you’re viewing as attractive.

This is why we have the contemplation of the body divided into 32 parts, to provide you with an alternative set of perceptions. Divide the body up into hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, and all the way down through the internal organs and the internal fluids. You can ask yourself: Which of them is really attractive? If you took them out and put them in piles on the floor, you’d be hard put to say that any of them were. And yet when you put them together in a

certain way, then suddenly the mind slaps these perceptions on them. You want to learn to see how arbitrary that is.

The same when you're angry: A person does something, and immediately you focus on how outrageous it was. You have certain standards that you apply to these things. And again, a lot of this is in your perceptions. I remember when I was in Thailand, I'd be sitting with a group of people, and someone would come in and make a few comments and then leave, and the people I was sitting with got really upset. They said, "Didn't you notice? There was no tail to his voice," as they said. In Thailand you soften your sentences, or you make them harder, depending on the little particles that you put at the end of the sentence. And this person had no particles at all. There was no tail to his voice. It got them all worked up, but it had all gone right past me.

This is one of the reasons why going to another country is useful to learn to see how arbitrary your perceptions can be.

Most people go over and they see how arbitrary the foreigners' perceptions are, but if you really want to learn from going abroad, you have to learn to turn around and look at yourself and realize: "The things I learned from my own culture were pretty arbitrary, too." It helps loosen up the way in which you apply perceptions, and helps make you more sensitive to how your perceptions really do shape the way you experience things.

The Buddha's message is that if you find you're shaping them in a way that's causing stress or suffering, you could shape them in another way. You could apply other perceptions. The trick is learning how to make the new perceptions stick. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration. You're holding a perception in mind, the perception of breath, and you're learning to make it stick by seeing how beneficial it is. And you can do the same with the perception of other elements.

Space is fun because it is, literally, the most spacious of the perceptions you can have. It's a sense of openness, a flow, of being unobstructed. The hard boundaries of your body break down. Everything seems permeable. I've talked to Dhamma teachers who think that that's actually a taste of awakening or the experience of awakening, but it's just a perception. It's a perception of space, and if you learn to hold it in mind, it requires good strong powers of concentration. This is why it's developed after you've worked with the more blatant elements like breath, fire, water, and earth.

There's your ability to hold a particular perception in mind, and this is how mindfulness is related to perception. You apply the perception and then you keep remembering it. Whatever comes up in the body: "breath, breath, breath, breath,

breath.” You learn to see it from the point of view as being breath, or breath being the thread that ties everything together. Once you build up the powers of mindfulness to keep that in mind, then you can go to subtler perceptions like space, but you still have to see that they’re perceptions. They’re a kind of karma.

So what we’re learning how to do is to take this karma of perception, which so often we use in unskillful ways, and turn it into what the Buddha called the fourth kind of karma, the karma that leads to the end of karma, making it part of the path, to unravel the ways in which we create suffering. We learn how to free ourselves from all the perceptions we’ve picked up from our cultural background, from our family, from our friends, from whatever, and see that they contain an element of choice.

Once you’ve developed that power of keeping a perception in mind, making it stick, then you can get better and better at applying the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. You can just hold these perceptions in mind. And again, these perceptions can lead to states of concentration. As the Buddha said, the perception of not-self can take you to the dimension of nothingness. Which may be why some people think of the perception of not-self as automatically insight, and that it automatically leads to something beyond concentration. But the Buddha notes that if you don’t develop it with further insight into what’s going on in the mind, just holding the perception in mind could lead you to what’s called the dimension of nothingness, what some people interpret as an experience of “no self,” but it’s just the dimension of nothingness, a state of concentration—a perception attainment.

The trick there, after you’ve learned how to hold that perception in mind, is to turn around and look at: What is this process of making perceptions, applying perceptions, shaping your experience through perceptions? That’s where the real insight comes. When you begin to see that a particular perception has its advantages but also has its drawbacks, and ultimately you get tired of the whole issue of shaping things through your perceptions: That’s when a sense of disenchantment and dispassion arises. But before you really got to understand this process of perception, you have to learn how to master it, to see that it really is a type of karma.

And you do have the choice, developing certain perceptions or other perceptions. Some of them you’ve developed willy-nilly, without really realizing that you’re developing them, in the same way as when we open our eyes and we see a three-dimensional world, we forget how much activity went into that skill. It’s in the practice of concentration that we try to remind ourselves that this is what’s happening: This is an action. This is a choice, each time you apply a

perception.

This realization puts you in a better position to understand the whole process, both in concentration and when you're dealing with issues that arise in the course of encounters with other people, events that happen around you. You want to get better and better at learning how to apply this skillfully: this perception, the appropriate perception that leads to true welfare and happiness.

So this is the karma we're working on right now. It could be just what they call bright karma that keeps us spinning around nicely in the process of wandering on. But if we learn how to apply it really skillfully, with all the elements of the path—right view through right concentration—then it becomes the karma that leads to the end of karma, perceptions that lead to the end of perceptions. That's one of the skills the Buddha wants us to develop.