

Mental Proliferation, Hallucinations and Views

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on
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This month I've been exploring the theme of Mental Proliferation, *papañca* in the Pāli, and its causes. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, the commentaries to the Buddha's discourses tell us that mental proliferations "arise from craving, conceit and wrong views (*taṇhā, māna, diṭṭhī*)."

(Bhikkhu Bodhi, Note 881, The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012, p. 1710)

So first just as a quick review: *papañca* or mental proliferation refers to our tendency to elaborate, with various kinds of thoughts, on the actual experiences of contact that we have between the sense organs, sense objects and sense consciousness at any of the six sense doors. We sometimes notice this because there can be an obsessive quality to mental proliferations -- thinking about the same thing over and over again.

Planning thought is an example of *papañca*. I don't know how your minds operate, but my own certainly has experienced this kind of "planning mind." I will find my mind thinking about how to do something again and again and again, with just minor adjustments made to make the plan "more perfect" each time, of course.

Mental proliferation can also be an expression of the hindrance of restlessness. Things keep coming up again and again and again and the mind just doesn't seem to settle for very long. Also when we get lost in our thoughts, we are caught in mental proliferation. When we mentally proliferate, we often build dream-like "virtual worlds" that we live within for a while, either not noticing our actual immediate experiences, or interpreting them through the lens of this virtual world.

So while a certain amount of conceptualization is necessary for us to function in the world, *papañca* is when it gets out of hand. For most of us this happens quite frequently.

Over the past weeks, we've explored the contributing factors of craving and conceit. Today I'd like to explore the factor of views.

The Pāli word is *diṭṭhi*. View and understanding are the most common translations for *diṭṭhi*. We find *diṭṭhi* as part of the word *sammādiṭṭhi*, the first step of the Noble Eightfold Path: Right View. We also find it in the word *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, identity-view which refers to a belief in a separate distinct identity or personality as "I." This view is regarded as a delusion, misunderstanding or example of a wrong view.

So views, in the broadest sense, can either be wholesome or unwholesome. I think it is fair to say that wholesome views would be those that are firmly grounded in experiential reality and lead to equanimity and open-heartedness. Another word, and maybe a better word, for this type of view is Insight or Wisdom. A more typical kind of view would be a strongly held opinion or belief. It could be political, it could be social, it could be artistic, scientific or

religious/spiritual. While one may feel deeply about this kind of view, that doesn't mean it is deeply grounded in experiential reality. And it is wrong view if it leads to more greed, hatred or delusion in our lives, in our actions of thought, word or deed.

In the sutta "To Vacchagotta on Fire" in the Middle Length Discourses, the Buddha speaks with the wandering ascetic Vacchagotta about a number of speculative or philosophical views that were common in his time. This is one example of what the Buddha says about each of the speculative views:

"Vaccha, the speculative view that the world is eternal is a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a vacillation of views, a fetter of views. It is beset by suffering, by vexation, by despair, and by fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna."

(Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, trans., MN 72.14, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995)

And in another sutta, "To Dīghanakha," the Buddha talks about what happens when one holds a view tightly. He says:

"If I obstinately adhere to my view ... then I may clash with ... others ... and when there is a clash, there are disputes; when there are disputes, there are quarrels; when there are quarrels, there is vexation.' Forseeing for himself clashes, disputes, quarrels, and vexation, he abandons that view and does not take up some other view."

(Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, trans., MN 74.6, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995)

But this abandoning is a little complicated. Dīghanakha tried to deal with it by saying "No views are valid." Yet as the Buddha pointed out, that is also a view. So what are we to do?

I think that the framework of the Three Hallucinations provides a way to both understand how views come to be formed and to understand how we can abandon views without getting caught in another one.

We begin with the simple experience of sensory contact when a sense organ, a sense object and sense consciousness each come together so that a sensory experience at one of the six sense doors is known. When contact happens, a feeling and a perception automatically arise. Feeling being a tone of the contact being pleasant, unpleasant or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant. Perception, in this instance, being a recognition of the primary characteristics of an object that allows us to identify it as "a tree" or "a bird" or "a nose" or "x".

Sometimes however there is what is called a Hallucination of Perception. These are the simple errors of perception that we make, such as the one sometimes mentioned in the suttas of mistaking a stick in the road for a snake. Or the one that meditators make of mistaking a pain in the knee for a kind of solid experience rather than a mix of changing sensations and feelings.

There are actually Four Kinds of Misperception that lead to the Hallucination of Perception. All of them are a result of failing to pay wise, careful and close attention to each moment of experience.

First, there is the misperception of regarding what is not attractive as attractive, as having an appealing quality or as unattractive, having an unappealing quality. We might see hair on someone's head and think it is really attractive. We might see strands of hair on the floor or in our food and think it is very unattractive. But actually it is just something we call "hair".

The second kind of Misperception is to take what is impermanent or inconstant for something that is permanent. If it has a pleasant feeling and we take it as permanent, then we are likely to assume that it will be a reliable source of satisfaction and we will try to hold onto it, leading us to struggle with reality. If it has an unpleasant feeling and we take it as permanent, then we are likely to assume that it will be an intolerable source of dissatisfaction and we will do everything we can to try to avoid it. Either way, we then will make a further mistaken assumption that when the pleasant persists or the unpleasant passes away, we assume it was because of our efforts at holding on or avoidance, which will further reinforce our tendency to struggle with reality.

The third kind of Misperception is to take what is unsatisfactory or unreliable as a source of peace or comfort or refuge or simply pleasure, as something that is satisfactory or reliable. This will lead to the same kind of struggles that I described for misperceiving permanence.

And the fourth kind of Misperception is to take what is conditional, what is dependent on other things for its arising as something that is unconditional, that is totally independent and substantial and hence also reliable and permanent.

Each of these misperceptions can lead to a momentary Hallucination of Perception. And each can be corrected by continuing to look at our experience more closely and with careful attention.

Out of Hallucinations of Perception may arise Hallucination of Mind. This is the conceptual elaboration based upon that initial error of perception. This is the realm of *papañca* or mental proliferation. We misperceive a pain in the knee as substantial and permanent, and then we begin to elaborate on it: "Oh, it will cause permanent damage that will require surgery. That will mean I will be on crutches and won't be able to perform my duties at work. If I'm not able to do that, I will be laid off. Then I won't be able to pay my bills and I will become homeless. So I absolutely should move my leg right now!"

When Hallucinations of Mind (these mental proliferations that are increasingly disconnected from our immediate experience at the six sense doors) are solidified into a strongly held belief about what is real, we have a Hallucination of View. The most crucial Hallucination of View

for practitioners is Identity View, or belief in an "I" that is separate and has substance and continuity over time.

Some other examples of Hallucination of View are: The belief that global warming is not man-made and is a hoax even in the face of our own experience and the huge amount of scientific data and agreement on this point. Or views that can lead to intense and deadly conflict and wars: For instance, "You are my enemy because your people were the enemy of my people in the 1950's or in the 1600's or whatever." Or "You are my enemy, or you are inferior to me, because your skin color is different than mine." So the Buddha encourages us to not cling to any view.

A way to not cling to Views is to undermine the series of Hallucinations that lead to them. If we use the framework of the Four Noble Truths, we can begin to investigate our Views. We begin to see, as the Buddha did, that holding views leads to agitation in the mind and heart, disputes and quarrels with others and vexation, and that clinging to views leads away from equanimity with life. We see the suffering that they lead to. Then we begin to loosen our attachment to our views. But we also start paying closer attention so we can catch them rather than be caught up in them.

As we investigate more closely the mental proliferations that form our views, seeing them arising and passing rather than grasping them or identifying with them, then we will get increasingly close to our immediate experience and even see through the Hallucinations of Perception that underlie both our Hallucinations of Mind and of Views.

So as we do our practice of being mindful of the fields of body, feelings, mind and categories of experience, we are training ourselves to live with more intimacy with our direct experience, with our actual lives. We are training ourselves to see that by returning attention to the sensations of the body, including the breath, we are grounding ourselves in the present moment, the now. We are also training our minds to recognize the true nature of each moment of our experience. We are training ourselves to see the non-attractive, impermanent, unsatisfactory and conditional nature of each moment. And as we do this we are deconstructing our Views, in particular our View of a separate, distinct self that exists over time.