

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 01-26-2016.

This is the fourth of a series of talks on the Five Aggregates Subject to Clinging, *pañc' upādāna-kkhandhā*, in Pāli. Tonight I want to focus on the aggregate of *sāñña*. The Pāli word *sāñña* is usually translated as "perception," although Anālayo Bhikkhu translates it as "cognition" in his book *Satipaṭṭhāna*.¹ We'll explore this further in a while.

In the Pāli discourses of the Buddha, we find him saying:

“And what, bhikkhus, is perception? There are these six classes of perception: perception of forms, perception of sounds, perception of odours, perception of tastes, perception of tactile objects, perception of mental phenomena. This is called perception. With the arising of contact there is the arising of perception. With the cessation of contact there is the cessation of perception. This Noble Eightfold Path is the way leading to the cessation of perception; that is, right view ... right concentration.”²

So perception is part of this model of each moment of experience: First a sense door and a sense object have to come together. Along with this there has to be consciousness, knowing or awareness that sense object and sense door have come together. When these three things happen together it is called contact. When there is contact there is feeling associated with it and this mental quality called *sāñña* occurs as well.

Sāñña has two functions:

1. It perceives or recognizes an object that has contacted this mind-body process. It's been suggested that this first function makes us aware of the general qualities of what we're encountering: It's a sight, a sound, an odor, a taste, a touch or a thought or image.
2. The second function is to then draw more deeply on our memory and imagination to know or cognize the experience. This thing that I am seeing and touching is an "apple". It has red and green colors, is sort of round and a little heavy. If I were to bite into it, the taste would be somewhere on the sour to sweet range, and it would probably be pleasant. And so forth.³

This is where we get into trouble. If we don't perceive/cognize something accurately, then we may relate to it in ways that lead to unsatisfactoriness and suffering. There's a concept called the Three Hallucinations that can help us to see how we get into trouble.

Sometimes there is what is called a Hallucination of Perception. These are the simple errors of perception that we make, such as mistaking a stick in the road for a snake, or 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.

1. First, there is regarding what is not attractive as attractive, as having an appealing quality. For instance, 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 that we call "hair" that has qualities such as hardness, some weight, some degree of smoothness or roughness, and some color.
2. 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. In other words, we will struggle with reality. We may make a further mistaken assumption when it does pass away. We may conclude that it was because of our efforts at avoidance, which will further reinforce our tendency to struggle with reality.
3. 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.
4. 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. We have these Hallucinations of Perception all the time, but they are easily corrected as we keep paying attention.

Out of Hallucinations of Perception may arise what is called a Hallucination of Mind. This is the conceptual elaboration based upon that initial error of perception. This is the realm of *papañca* or mental proliferation. For example, 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 are solidified into a strongly held belief about what is real, we have a Hallucination of View. We can think of View as being like a window or a pair of glasses that we see through. If the View is based on a misperception, then whatever we see through the view will be misperceived.

For practitioners the most crucial Hallucination of View is Identity View, or belief in an "I" that is separate, has substance and continuity over time, and is independent with control of what happens. When we view life through the view or perspective of "I" we feel that we have to control the things around us and that things should happen in our favor. Or we may feel victimized by the events of our lives, rather than just understanding them as events that occurred because certain conditions or circumstances came together in that way.

Our perceptions may lead to either unwholesome/unskillful actions -- which lead to more unsatisfactoriness and suffering, or they may lead to wholesome/skillful actions -- which lead to equanimity and harmony in our relationship to life in this moment. So it is important to learn to work with perception and to try to make our perceptions as close to lived reality as we can. As our wisdom grows, our ability to perceive things as they are increases. And so then we are able to respond in ways that lead to less agitation, struggle, stress and suffering.

One of my teachers, Matthew Flickstein, emphasized working with perceptions by distinguishing between what he called circumstances and our perception of those circumstances.⁴ I would call it distinguishing between our perceptions of what is occurring now, and our misperceptions or conceptual elaborations about what is occurring now. A simple example of this would be what I spoke of earlier about knee pain. First there is a perception of "PAIN ... IN MY KNEE." Even this simple perception may not be entirely accurate, as those of us who have investigated "PAIN" know. "PAIN" is a concept about a changing cascade of momentary, unpleasant sensations. But after we perceive "PAIN IN MY KNEE," we may move beyond the Hallucination of Misperception to the Hallucination of Mind where we conceptually elaborate on the misperception: "I'M

GOING TO NEED SURGERY!" and so forth. And then we might develop a View about meditation, such as "Meditation destroys people's knees. It is dangerous and shouldn't be practiced!"

Matt suggested we have three ways of responding to this:

1. We can change the perception. For instance, we might change it to "Oh, this is an interesting experience. I wonder what I can learn from it?"
2. A second way we can respond is by changing the circumstances. For instance, we could move our leg.
3. And a third way of responding would be to simply be mindful of the circumstances, perhaps by investigating our experience more deeply, or just watching it rise and fall.

What I'd like to encourage you to do this week is to play with this practice of distinguishing between circumstances and perceptions. Give special attention to when "I" thoughts arise. What are the circumstances that "I" is reacting to? What is the perception? Which of the three ways of responding might you choose? What happens when you do so? Just pay attention to all of this, meeting it with mindfulness and kindness. See if it gives you a little more freedom or ease in how you live your day-to-day life, as well as during your formal meditation practice.

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Notes:

1. Anālayo Bhikkhu. *Satipaṭṭhāna*, Cambridge, UK: Windhorse Publications, 2003, p. 204.
2. SN 22.56, Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, [p. 896, {PTS III.22 60}].
3. Hamilton, p. 55-56.
4. Flickstein, Matthew. *Living Through the Eyes of Truth Workshops 1 & 2*, 2001 & 2003.