

Working with Perception

Ajahn Sucitto

What is perception? It's the most immediate derived sense of an object: It's a flower, it's a car, it's a person. There's a mild impact, contact, a sense of, ah—something strikes the eye. There's an immediate flurrying or movement around what that is.

This becomes more apparent when you meditate and slow the mind down, so that you find some space between the rush of ideas and moods. Then as you're abiding in a fairly spacious state you feel how things strike you. It could be pleasant, like a bouncing chipmunk running across the path in front of you, *boing*. There was stillness, then you get the touch of contact, maybe a brief mental movement of alarm. Then, "Oh, it's a little chipmunk." There's contact, then perception (*saññā*, the moment of recognition), then a conceptual label that tells you what it "is" – though really this is what the "thing" means to you.

Varieties of perception

Perceptions are meanings, so they are subjective and depend upon, first of all, functioning sense faculties which are limited and conditioned. They can't give us truth; they can only give us pieces that work for us. For example, what's the world like to a bat? Humans mostly operate through visual and mental activity. Bats don't do visuals; they squeak thousands of times a second, so they create this huge sound net, reaching out. Flittering around at night, they don't hit things; they form perceptions based on sound, and through that they can detect and catch all kinds of bugs.

What's New York like to a dog? I bet skyscrapers don't mean anything to dogs, but who peed on that fire hydrant is probably really headline news. Dogs check out the scents of who or what passed through an hour or more ago. They're able to track this to a fine degree.

So the first level of subjectivity, of "it all depends," is one of the sense system of each specific being. What is color to a color-blind person? In some cases people suffer from

neurological damage. Some people can't perceive movement because the nerve endings in the little bit of the brain that register and understand movement have been damaged. So for example, they can't track and interpret the range of visual change that tells most of us that a car is coming towards them; first it's a small car, then a slightly bigger car, another bigger car, a fender and then blackness. The brain can't get a sense of the synchronized movement coming out of that.

Another example is synesthesia, a mix up of senses whereby people associate one sense with another. They might see music, or associate a number with a color—number five is blue, or Tuesdays are green. They don't know why, that's just what comes up. Most of us to some degree are synesthetic.

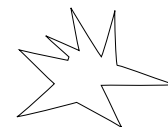
That's what onomatopoeia is about: Certain sounds give you an impression of something. Say you have a kind of very soft, spongy amoeboid object on the one hand, and you have something that's made out of shards of broken glass on the other. A Martian comes down and says, "This one's a bobble-wobble," which one do you think he's talking about? You'll say it's the amoebic thing, because we associate that kind of sound with that particular form. If the Martian said, "This is a kiki-kiki," you'd think of the broken glass as being sharp, narrow sounds. Sounds transfer into visual memories and metaphors.

Some perceptions depend on karmic meaning, on one's own history, even sometimes from uterine experiences. If your mother is in a state of anxiety or depression when you're in the womb, all

those neuro-hormones are going to affect your neurology, so you can have an unsafe feeling with regard to what you're in that has no specific object; it's because of what you've been doused in. In this case it might set your neurological



Kiki?



Bobble?

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and with it arises the sense of “one who feels.”**

barometer to *what's around me is not comfortable*. Some people get extremely afflicted with mental perceptions: Say you're claustrophobic—you always feel oppressed by being in something; or agoraphobic—you feel frightened if you come out of something. You can't be rationally convinced because it can't be rationally processed. It's perceptual.

Reflex perceptions

Dependent upon mental perceptions, or “felt meanings”, our reflex actions and programs come up. The *sankhāras* (“dispositions” “programs” or “activities”) start operating, dependent upon these meanings. So for example, we come to a meditation retreat with the sense: “I chose to come on retreat, I wanted to come on retreat, I really needed to come on retreat.” Then we sit down—and the perception arises of lonely, or lost, or estrangement, and, “I don't want to be here with this.” What happened? We maybe feel controlled by the structure, or we don't feel safe with so many strange people. All that reflexive stuff kicks in because often when we meditate, we come underneath the surface to the felt meanings of things that have defined me, at a very basic level. And then reflexes start kicking in.

I remember when one of the sisters [nuns] went on a long-distance walk out in the moors. She had to walk ten, twelve miles in the rain, in the cold, and carry her bulky bag and tent, and live pretty rough. But it felt blissful because she was choosing to do it. Whereas to walk up the hill from the nuns' cottage 300 yards from the main house every day just felt like a real pain, and unfair. Because it's something she had to do. That feeling of oppression touched a reflex.

The Honeyball Sutta (*Madhupindika Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 18*) has a beautiful description:

“Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises.” Eye consciousness arises from a sense base, an object. “The meeting of the three is contact.” So, *bong*, something strikes.

With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates. Based on what a person complicates, the perceptions in

categories of complication assail him or her as regards the past, present or future forms cognizable via the eye.

So there's a process whereby something starts off as involuntary: We've got an eye, and the form arises, and *bang*, eye consciousness happens. There's no action in that, something just occurs. The meeting of the three is contact, so again that's completely passive. With contact there is a requisite condition, there is feeling.

Suddenly a subject has crept in there. Before it was all impersonal, now it's become “one feels.” It's not sketched in at this moment as him or her, it's just “one.” When feeling arises the first thing that happens is, “Ah, I am feeling.” But it's an impersonal sense of self, “I'm feeling this, this is happening to me.” So the perception rises up and labels the feeling and with it arises the sense of “one who feels.”

Then what one perceives, one thinks about. Now a little more action starts occurring, thinking. This is much more to do with personal history, adding the narrative of “I'm always with this, I'm the victim, He is, She never does” etc. So “what one thinks about one complicates.” There's this word “complicate” or *papañca*, which also translates as “proliferates” or “projects” or “diversifies.” Suddenly it becomes all kinds of manifestations: it's this, it's that, it shouldn't be, could be, ought to be, reminds me of this, what am I going to do about that? Sound familiar?

I call it the *papañca* fairy. She waves a wand and then suddenly all this stuff comes rising up. You can drop one or two words, like “current president,” and *bong*, all this stuff comes rising up. Cascades of emotionally charged thought perceptions of “he, she, it, he can't and shouldn't and how dare they,” and so on. You feel drenched in gobs of past, present and future. That's the flooding based on what perception brings up.

Somebody gave an example of twilight: You see this object on the path and the first thing is a shock, it's a snake and then, alright it's a rope. The first perception isn't necessarily accurate, but there's an emotional tone; it could be fear, joy, desire, aversion. Something wants to retract, or something wants to go out and meet it.

You notice it when it's unexpected; you walk around a corner and there's somebody standing there you weren't expecting, and there's an immediate shock, "It's somebody in a uniform, oh dear." Whereas if it was a small person in a jumpsuit you wouldn't feel the same way. It's not just a visual object that's arisen, but a meaning has arisen. That's the perception.

So from an immediate external sense—sight, sound or touch—comes a recognition that something is impacted; that's contact. And there's a naming. With naming, feeling and perception arrive and trigger off an act of conceiving. That "name" may not stay very long. You may in fact go back to that visual object in a split second and check it out: "Oh it's not Jack, it's Fred." "Oh he's not angry, he's just got a headache." Those perceptions shift, but they all refer to mood tones which can be fundamental things such as safety, pleasure or pain, control or freedom.

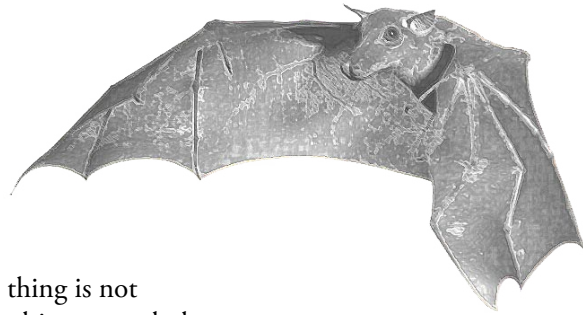
Some of these perceptual meanings get built up through history. If it's your house and you see things and there's a feeling, "Oh I should do this because the carpet's untidy, or the paint's coming off the wall," or something like that: I should do it. Somebody else's house, you think, "Oh look at that," you don't get the same feeling. You might think "Why don't they do something about it?" The sense of self also comes in with naming things as this is mine or not mine.

These are the kind of root meanings that get established, and they don't necessarily start running as thoughts. They're just emotional positions. As we first perceive an object—green, red, black, white, car, dog, whatever it is—that's the first way in which it's named. Then it's referred to the mind, which adds its own meanings. So you get this interplay between different levels of perception. The concept arises, it's to be protected, it's to be cherished, or whatever it is. It wouldn't be the case if it was a different concept, such as it's somebody else's, or it's a wreck. The mind also has its own sense base, which is concepts, which also generate the same kind of meanings, essentially: safe, warm, comfortable, mine, not mine.

Perception and truth

Interestingly enough, in Buddhadharma the aim is not really to find truth, *per se*. All truth is considered to be contingent, relative. The main

What's the world like to a bat?



thing is not ultimate truth, but peace, realization. Truths are of a relative nature, the relative truths of suffering and cessation of suffering, which are contingent upon the experience of suffering and not suffering. They don't exist in abstract. They're not ultimate truths; whereas the Western mind often believes there is such a thing as ultimate truths.

In any action the important thing is the perceptual meaning, because that tells you something about where your own angle is. So you walk through the kitchen here, and your sleeve catches a cup and knocks it onto the floor and smashes the cup. You might get the feeling, "Oh goodness me, I've done something wrong." Or it might be, "What idiot put that cup there, right in the way?" So which is the truth?

Or you could get philosophical about it and say the cup is of a nature to break, it's just fulfilling its purpose. Or you could be Zen—there's no cup, no breaking, everything is just in a neither broken nor unbroken state. Or, it's my karma to break a cup. It had to happen because of something I did in a previous life. Or if you're a politician you can say "We managed to go through the kitchen with no damage at all to teapots and saucers. It was successful, there was a little collateral, but we don't think it's in the public interest to let you know about that." And you could say that's true also.

When you touch into the meanings of what actually happens, they're not concepts that float around as abstract realities of an undying nature. They're actually momentary and subjective and intimate experiences that keep rising up. They're not true in an ultimate sense, but they're actual. All we want to know about is not what's ultimately true, but how do we release ourselves from suffering and stress.

The problem of "truth" is that concepts and ideas are abstract. By themselves they have no

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explicit felt meaning until they're introduced to each individual's mind. So if you were in the Second World War, the words "Germany" or "Japan" would have triggered off different meanings in the minds of people who were on the other side of that conflict. Nowadays it would trigger off different sets of meanings. In terms of music, "Germany" means Bach, Beethoven and so forth. If you thought of it in terms of the Second World War, you thought of Hitler and Nazis.

Through examining and contemplating perceptions, we begin to see the relative truths of the angles or biases that we have, the blaming, self-blaming or justifying, or ignoring. So if you knock a cup over, that touches the thing of wrong, done wrong and then you get this whole flurry of, "I hope I don't get found out," or "What an idiot I am" or "I'm always doing this kind of thing." Or "Why can't I be more mindful?" All of which have some "truth" in them, a truth about who we are, or the kind of kamma that's running.

Perceptions don't give you an ultimate reality; they give you a subjective readout of where you're coming from. We begin to see obsessions and latent tendencies that flare up. The more you contemplate this, the more you get a profile of the kind of tendencies that cause one suffering, stress, imbalance, agitation, defensiveness, anger, greed and so forth.

Widening the field

Perceptions are what you have to bring your dharma practice to bear on, along with the reflex dispositions and programs of self. So there may be the tendency to find fault with yourself or with others, or justify yourself, or to basically space out and forget the whole thing altogether.

It's also the case that practice entails deliberately inducing perceptions through concepts. Meditation itself starts with establishing skillful perception through selective thinking (otherwise known as wise reflection). The first reflection is of Refuge. We check in with the reality of being here and how we can be with that. This means taking Refuge. And we do that by establishing the felt meaning, the

perception of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha—that which is compassionate, clear and wise, the way and the teachings, the exemplars. We bring those into our lives by bringing them into our minds. And along with those reflections comes the sense of belonging to something good and wise and trustworthy shared by many people throughout time and place.

Another reflection brings up the perception of impermanence: You acknowledge that this changes and that changes. And bringing that into practice is more than an idea: We experience through direct perception that sensations change, and feelings come and go. So the reflex reaction to feeling gets checked.

This is not really making a comment on the nature of what passes, whether you're glad it passed. It just helps to shift your way of perceiving to a wider frame of reference, not focusing so much on the topic itself but upon its changing nature. This lightens a lot of the conceptual intensities that can occur around topics such as a thought sensed as a feeling. Where a thought comes up we may think, "Terrible thought, hideous thought, ugly thought, shouldn't have this thought, wow, where did I ever get this thought from?" Or we can notice that it is a changing energy. You can widen the perceptual field in terms of time, just holding that space of perception for a few moments in which the thought comes, flies around, and fades out. Then there's a different emotional sense that comes with that, detachment and dispassion arises, which is calming and steadying and supports clarity of response. This is what people often call vipassana, developing non-attachment through experiencing change.

This perception allows you to address a very wide field of phenomena, one which includes the liked and the disliked, the urgent, the unimportant, the trivial, the nonsensical, the confused, which fall into that same pattern. Whereas if one wanted to focus purely on the liked, then some objects wouldn't fit into that category. So you grow broader and your confidence in being at peace with the unwelcome and the weird develops accordingly.

***Through insight into perception, the mind has given up on “naming”
and has realized peace.***

Widening the perceptual field also means we include what it is that self and other have in common: such as that we all dislike pain, we all appreciate pleasure, we all want safety, we all like friendliness—simple things. We widen to the “we” sense. This helps to generate sensitivity to ethics and compassion. Generally speaking, the wider the perceptual field, the more skillful, because the more beings you can fit into that, the less conflict, division, and bias there is.

This widening also helps us recognize what we leave out—parts of ourselves, perhaps, that we don’t really like to attend to, the grubbier, or the less pleasing aspects of the body, or our death or sickness. But with detachment it’s just a body and it changes and all bodies do this. We can widen and be with that and the mind becomes more peaceful, less defensive and less obsessive in those respects.

Non-conflict

The Honeyball Sutta makes a related point about views.

Dandapani (“Stick-in-hand”) out roaming and rambling around for exercise went to the Great Wood, went to the Blessed One, who was under the bilva sapling, exchanged courteous greetings with him and stood to one side. As he was standing there he said to the Blessed One, “What’s the contemplative’s doctrine? What does he proclaim?”

In other words, what’s your statement about ultimate reality? And the Buddha says, well, my statement is that any kind of doctrine,

...the sort of doctrine where one does not keep quarreling with anyone in the cosmos... that sort of doctrine where perceptions no longer obsess the brahman who remains dissociated from sensual pleasures... Such is my doctrine.

So he doesn’t give him a concept of what it is. He just says basically, it’s anything that fits within his sense of non-quarreling, non-conflict, non-obsession.

“So Dandipani shakes his head, wags his tongue...” —which is an interesting gesture,

wagging the tongue—“... raises his eyebrows so his forehead was wrinkled in three furrows...” and “Left, leaning on his stick.” In other words, it went over his head. He was looking for some concept that he could quarrel with, and the Buddha didn’t give him anything.

You also find this freedom from views in the first Sutta in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, (The Great Brahma Net) which describes 62 different views of the self in the cosmos that people were arguing about at the time. The Buddha, when asked about this himself, said, well, every one of these views I know. I’ve been there, and I realize that this view arises dependent upon contact. In other words, something happens, you try to figure it out, and you come up with one of these views and you hold onto it. The Buddha says, I know all that and I know how to release the mind from holding onto that. Because of this, I’m not snared in any of these views or opinions.

So it’s interesting isn’t it? It sounds so counter-intuitive, but he’s actually seen all the positions that you could take, and he’s saying, all that action, all that effort, where does it take you? Another place, another position, arguing with other people. Why don’t you just come out of needing to have a position?

You realize everything and anything that is held onto can’t be an ultimate truth, it’s just a naming, based upon a position. So, because of that, “...this is the end of taking up of rods and bladed weapons or arguments, quarrels, disputes, accusations, divisive tale-bearing and false speech. This is where these unskillful things cease without remainder. And that is what I teach.”

So what is it that Buddhas do know? “Everything that arises is dependently arisen, is impermanent and not-self, and it passes.” And so what? What does that mean? Well, there’s no perception for that, because through insight into perception the mind has given up on “naming” and has realized peace. If you do the practice that takes you to that, you’ll know it for yourself.

Abbot of Cittaviveka (Chithurst) in England, Ajahn Sucitto became a bhikkhu in Thailand in 1976 in the lineage of Ajahn Chah. This article is based on a BCBS course he taught in 2008.