

How to Use the Three Perceptions

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Of all the Buddha's teachings, there are only two that he said are categorically true. In other words, there are only two that always meet his three criteria for right speech: that it be true, beneficial, and timely. One is the four noble truths. The other is the teaching that skillful actions should always be developed; unskillful ones should always be abandoned.

Now, notice that the three characteristics or the three perceptions are not mentioned there. That's because they don't always fit the Buddha's categories for right speech. They are true, as in that sutta we just chanted right now, that says whether these is a Buddha or not a Buddha, these things are true. But holding them in mind is not always beneficial, and it's not always timely.

You have to figure out the right time and the right place for using them. This is a point that has to be emphasized over and over again. Over the centuries, especially in the commentaries, there developed a view that the Buddhist teaching on not-self meant that there is no self, and that was his distinctive teaching—even though when you look in the Canon, you find that he again and again refuses to answer question whether or not there is a self. He says that if you say there is no self, that's siding with annihilationism; if you say there *is* a self, that's siding with eternalism. That's a question that the Buddha would always put aside. And yet there developed the view that when the Buddha says that all dhammas are not self, he means that there is no self.

But if you think about it, there are lots of times when that teaching would be extremely detrimental. For instance, if people are feeling tempted to do something really unskillful, they can tell themselves, "Well, if there is no self, there's nobody to reap the rewards of this, then it doesn't really matter even if the results are bad." In fact, there was actually a monk at the time of the Buddha who thought in that way. And the Buddha reprimanded him. There are other times, say, when a mother loses a child, and you tell her that there was no child to begin with, she'd bash you over the head.

So when *do* you use these teachings?

One, remember that the Buddha taught these, not so much as characteristics of things as perceptions you apply to things. And when do you apply these perceptions? Here it's good to think back in terms of those categorical teachings, especially the ones in the four noble truths, because each of the four truths entails

a duty. And it's in fulfilling the duties for the four noble truths that you pull out these perceptions when they're appropriate.

For example, with suffering or stress, the first noble truth: The duty is to comprehend it. "Comprehending" here means understanding it to the point of dispassion. So first you've got to figure out where in your life you're clinging to the aggregates, because that's the Buddha's succinct statement for the first noble truth: Suffering is the five clinging-aggregates. So where are you clinging to the aggregates? And how is it suffering? That's when you start looking at the things you're clinging to, and ask yourself, "Is this constant or inconstant? If it's inconstant, is it easeful or stressful?" And the third question: If it's inconstant and stressful, is it worth holding onto as self?" In other words, is it worth going into all that trouble to claim that this is you or yours?

That's the application of the perceptions with regard to the first noble truth. This is a really useful line of questioning when you're sick, when the body is unwell, or when there are obvious ways in which the mind is making itself suffer. You can ask yourself, "This thing that I am holding on to, this thought, this idea, this object that I'm holding on to: Is it really worth the effort?" No. Then let it go, either by just seeing that it's not-self or not worthy of holding on to as self—or sometimes just seeing that holding on to it is stressful, you let it go.

The same applies to the second noble truth. When there's craving and you see that you're suffering from the craving, you tell yourself, "Why do I bother wanting that? Do I really need that thing that I am craving?" There are three kinds of craving that the Buddha points to. There's craving for sensuality, for becoming, and for non-becoming. Sensuality means the stories we tell ourselves about how great some sensual pleasure is going to be or how great some sensual pleasure was—the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile sensations. Our fascination with all those stories: What does it get us?

In Ajaan Lee's image, he says that thinking about tomorrow's pleasure is like licking tomorrow's soup pot when there's no soup in it yet. Thinking about yesterday's pleasures is like licking yesterday's soup pot when the soup is all gone. There is no real nourishment there.

So again, you can apply the three perceptions here with the second noble truth to see that the craving isn't worth the effort, isn't worth holding on to.

With regard to the third noble truth, this is when you use the three perceptions as a test. When you've found something really good in your meditation and you're inclined to think, "This must be it," ask yourself, "Is there any inconstancy here?" Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about this. In the stages of meditation when the mind gets extremely bright and utterly amazing, it's very

easy to conclude, “Okay, this must be it.” And some people don’t even get that far. They get to other stages where, say, everything seems like One, and they’ve heard from someplace that the practice is all about Oneness. So they cling to that. Or even just the equanimity you can develop as you see that things are arising and passing away and arising and passing away. There’s a certain equanimity that comes from that and you can latch on to that.

So you’ve got to test it. You have to ask yourself, “Okay, is this constant? Does it really meet all the criteria?” Because nibbana is not inconstant, it’s not stressful. If you watch carefully, you begin to realize that even in those peaceful states, there is a little bit of wavering, there is a little bit of uncertainty, a little bit of instability, and that right there is an element of stress. So you say, “Okay, this hasn’t passed the test.”

Even when you do run into the unfabricated, this is where the teaching that *sabbe dhammā anattā*—all phenomena are not self, not just fabricated things but also the unfabricated—there tends to be an attachment where you say, “Oh, this must be it, this is it, I’ve got it.” There’s a little bit of “I” in there. xx

There’s a passage where the Buddha says that when someone claims, “I’m unbound, I’ve attained awakening,” just the fact that that person says “I” indicates that there’s some attachment still in there. The mind’s proper reaction to those things is, “There is this”—there is a cessation of fabrication, there is a cessation of suffering. You pare down the narratives that you tell yourself to the point where you can say, “Oh, there is just this, there is just that,” without getting any “I” involved in there. That’s the proper way of noting these things, because then the mind is not clinging to anything at all. When that last vestige of clinging is gone, that’s when it’s possible to gain total freedom.

As for the fourth noble truth, especially when you’re doing concentration right here, you do not want to be telling yourself that “The breath is inconstant, the mind’s concentration is inconstant, I’ve gained an insight, what’s next?” That short circuits everything right there. If you’re going to apply the three perceptions to anything, apply them to your distractions. Greed comes up; anger comes up—sensual desire, ill will, sleepiness, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, doubt. Just tell yourself, “These things are inconstant. They come and they go. Why believe them? Why put the energy into them to keep following them?”

First you have to recognize that they’re hindrances. That right there is an accomplishment, because sometimes anger comes up and we can tell ourselves, “That person I’m angry at really deserves my anger” or “The object of my desire really is desirable.” Or we get sleepy and think, “I’ve really got to go to sleep.” In other words, you side with the thing. You don’t see it as a hindrance; you see it as

a friend. So first you have to see, one, it's a hindrance, and then two, "It takes energy to engage in this, so why bother? What does it have to offer?" Then you can let it go.

But as for the breath and the state of your concentration, you don't want to be contemplating how inconstant they are. You're actually trying to push against the principles of inconstancy and stress and not self. You're trying to make this this concentration lasting and constant. You're trying to make it pleasant. You're trying to get it under your control, which is what the whole notion of self is. As the Buddha said, it's not the case that all the aggregates are always painful or always uncontrollable. On the ultimate level there is stress, on the ultimate level there is a lack of control, but in the meantime you can get some use out of these things.

After all, what is your concentration made up of? It's made out of those aggregates, but in a very subtle form. And for the time being, those are aggregates you don't apply these three perceptions to. You've got something good, so you want to protect it. You don't just throw it away. Ajaan Lee says that people who like to run right away to inconstancy, stress, and not-self are like people who let go when they don't have anything to begin with. They let go like paupers. It's like not having a Cadillac and saying, "Okay, I'm going to let go of my Cadillac." You don't have a Cadillac. You haven't gone to the trouble of getting a Cadillac to begin with, so when you let go of it, nobody else can gain any benefit from it.

That's what's important to know about the good things you let go of. Ultimately you will turn around and apply the perceptions of inconstancy, stress and not self to your concentration, but that doesn't mean you won't have concentration anymore. You go beyond it, but then you come back and you can use it as a tool. The same way with the Cadillac: You go to the trouble of buying a good car—as far as I know, Cadillacs are okay—and once you have it and then let go of it, it's still there for everybody to use. You can still use it; other people can use it. In other words, you can still gain benefit from these things.

When the Buddha gained awakening, he didn't lose his ability to enter into concentration. He didn't lose the things that he let go of. He let go of the clinging, but the good things were still there for him to use. And it's the same here. You have to work on the concentration, and only when you've got it really solid and it has done its work on the mind—calmed the mind, soothed the mind, nourished the mind, given it a good place to stand so that it can watch things clearly—*then* you start applying the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not self to the aggregates that make up the concentration. The form of the body in concentration is the breath; there's also the feeling of pleasure; the perception

that holds you with the breath; the thought fabrications, the verbal fabrications—evaluating the breath and the mind; and even the consciousness of the concentration. You start seeing that these things, too, are inconstant. There's some subtle inconstancy here. And you incline the mind toward something that's not inconstant. There's still some stress in here. So you incline the mind toward something that's not going to change on you, that doesn't have that stress of change. You realize that this, too, is something worth not identifying with.

If you handle that contemplation well, then the mind opens up to that other dimension where there is just this—the dimension of the deathless. When you return from that, the concentration is still there; you can still do it. All the things that you developed on the path are still there for you to use. But you can pick them up and put them down. They don't weigh you down. You don't have to carry them around. They're there.

So make sure you use these teachings at the proper time, at the proper place. That's when they're beneficial, all within the context of the four noble truths and the question of what's skillful, what's not skillful. Those are the teachings that are always true, always applicable, always beneficial, always timely. If you start dealing with thoughts and perceptions that are not beneficial even though they may be true, you can get the mind all screwed up. You can start thinking about how the Sun someday would go nova, and would explode, and the Earth will be burnt to a crisp and then just disappear. That's true, as far as we know. But how helpful is that for you right now? It can actually get you discouraged from doing good things if you think about it in the wrong way.

So remember to take as your framework the Buddha's categorical truths, the ones that are always true, always beneficial, always timely. Always make them your framework. As for his other teachings, you have to figure out when they're beneficial, when they're timely, using that larger framework as your standard of judgment. That's how you grasp the teachings rightly.

Remember, the Buddha said that his teachings are like a snake. If you grasp the snake wrongly, it's going to bite you. If you grasp the snake by the tail, it's going to turn around; it's got teeth on the other end and it'll bite you. If you grasp it rightly, pinning its head down with a forked stick, then you can get use out of the snake. But notice, you still grasp it. If you don't grasp the snake at all, you don't get any benefit from it at all. The question is, how do you grasp it well?

Knowing how to do that is part of the skill of right view. Knowing how to do that is how you perform the duties appropriate for all the noble truths. That's when you get the benefit out of the Buddha's teachings.

And the Buddha's teachings are all about that benefit. The fact that he presents his teachings as a path means that they're all about where the path goes. They're means to an end. The path has its fruit. Or as the Buddha says it another way, the Dhamma has its *attha*, which means "goal," "benefit," and also "meaning." It's in getting to that freedom from suffering: That's where the meaning of all this lies. That's when you really know what the teachings mean, and the path has done its work. Everything else is a means. We're here in the present moment not because the present moment is a good place to stay, but we're learning to use the present moment as a means to something higher.

So remember, this applies to *all* of the Buddhist teachings: They're a means. So it's up to us to try to figure out how to use them correctly so that we can attain the goal at which they're all aimed.