

## *Representing the World to Itself*

*January 21, 2019*

We're all sitting in the same room, but we're living in different worlds. Each of us has our own world as we represent it to ourselves: our pictures of ourselves, our pictures of the people and things around us. Where do those pictures come from? They come from our moving around in the world, looking for something, looking to get away from pain, looking to get toward pleasure. We begin piecing together our pictures of the world based on our actions and the results we get from our actions.

As we get older, we begin to get worlds that seem to be satisfactory. They're good enough. Some people stop with good enough, and their perceptions begin to get ossified. Some people find it really hard to change because they're invested in the way they picture the world to themselves, telling themselves, "This is where happiness is found, this is how it's found, and this is all you can expect." But some people are not satisfied. Sometimes they take their lack of satisfaction out on the world. In other words, instead of changing their perceptions or changing the way they represent the world to themselves, they just push the world in ways that it really can't respond, or if it responds, a lot of harm is done. Some people are sensitive to the harm. Some people are not.

The Buddha was the sort of person, though, who was not satisfied with the world, but he didn't push it in that way. He realized that the problem lay in his perceptions of the world, his perceptions of himself: *That* was where there was something wrong. He tried experimenting with different ways of acting, and different ways of acting would then lead to different ways of perceiving himself and the world around him. He kept this up until he found a body of perceptions that really worked. That's a lot of what he taught.

Right view is made out of perceptions. He presented it with analogies to help him make the path a lot clearer, but also to replace our perceptions, the perceptions we've been holding to, with other perceptions. At the same time, he set a higher bar, raising the standards, telling people that there's a happiness that is totally independent of conditions, and that this happiness could be found through human effort. And although it takes a lot of effort, it's really worth it.

Now, some people are satisfied where they are and they're willing to change a few perceptions, or maybe none at all. But there are others who feel the suffering that they're causing themselves. And they're more willing to change. The problem is that these worlds are pretty hermetically sealed. You can't look into someone

else's world to see how it differs from yours. If we're satisfied with how we manage the world, then it's going to be very hard to change. But when we recognize there's suffering—that we're causing ourselves suffering, we're causing ourselves harm—then we're more open to the idea that maybe there's another way we can sketch the world to ourselves. Because that's what those perceptions are, these representations we make: They're sketches. They're not the real thing. They don't give the full picture.

We've been going by sketch-work, and as long as it's worked, we're okay with it. But it's good to remember that these perceptions, as the Buddha calls them, are like mirages. They look real, but they're just representations. When you think of them that way, then it gets easier to change and say, "Maybe I'm representing things to myself in the wrong way." You look for alternatives, sketches that can actually get you to act in a way that ends suffering. Here again, the Dhamma gives you some ideas of where you can look or how you can question your current perceptions. But it's that willingness to try out something else: That's how you grow.

We start with something simple like this, like the breath. There are lots of different ways you can represent the breath to yourself, lots of different ways you can picture it to yourself. I know in my own case that reading Ajaan Lee, when he talks about the different breath energies in the body, opened up a whole new world of what could be done in meditation. Prior to that point, I'd been taught that the breath is just the air coming in and out through the nose and that you're not supposed to do anything with it. It got very boring very fast. And from that point on, it required sheer willpower to stick with it. Whereas if you think of the breath as energy suffusing the body—going through the nerves, going through the blood vessels, going through the muscles, going through the pores, surrounding the body—these perceptions give you new handles on how you can breathe, how you can experience the breath, and how you can develop a sense of well-being that can spread through the body.

I know a lot of people have trouble with these perceptions. They say, "Well, breath is air, and air can't go through the nerves." If you hold those perceptions in mind, it really does make it difficult. But you can change the perceptions. Think of breath as energy suffusing the body, then it gives you a lot to work with. This is the advantage of the new perceptions. They give you new opportunities, new ways of doing things, so that you're not stuck in your old habits. And from this example, you begin to look around at other ways in which your labels are actually limiting you.

Years back, I got into a discussion with someone who said that he couldn't understand how anyone could be able to experience unconditioned happiness or an unconditioned dimension, because, after all, we're conditioned beings, he said. I told him, "You've got it backwards. The Buddha's approach was not to start with what we are and then from there to figure out what we can do. His approach was to explore first what could be done."

As you learn new skills, your sense of who you are is going to change. And you begin to see that your sense of who you are is just that: It's a sense. It's a perception. If you hold on very tightly to a particular perception, you're limiting yourself. But if you're open to other possibilities, in some cases you'll find that they're not possible, but in some cases you'll find that things you would never have expected *are* possible. So this, again, helps to loosen up the perceptions we have—as long as we're willing to get them loosened. Because as I've said, sometimes you've been living with a certain set of perceptions, they've worked pretty well, so you get invested in them. You stake your happiness on things being a certain way in line with the way you've perceived things, and those perceptions are going to be hard to let go of.

You have particular ideas who you are or who the people around you are, what your relationships are, what's worth doing, what's not worth doing. Sometimes we have so much invested in these things that it's going to be hard to let go. It's only when you begin to see there's some suffering there and you're open to the idea that maybe the suffering is not necessary: That's a big push right there because sometimes you hold on to a perception, saying, "Well, the advantages I get from this perception, or this way of looking at the world are such that I've just got to put up with the drawbacks."

For some people, the drawbacks have to be really blatant before they're willing to give up an old way of looking at things. But as meditators, we want to learn how to have a little bit more fluidity around our perceptions—and a little more sensitivity. As the Buddha said, suffering is not necessary. There may be some suffering in the path, but it's not going to be there forever. There are ways of acting where you can create less and less suffering for yourself and for the people around you. As long as you're open to that possibility, there are other ways of perceiving things. There's a possibility to grow, and a possibility for greater happiness than might have been allowed in your old world view, your old way of putting things together.

So remember, where do we get our perceptions? It's from our actions, groping around in the world. It's as if you're in a dark room where you move in different directions and run into things. At first you might get discouraged, but then you

begin to create a mental map that helps you get around through the darkness. What the Buddha's offering here is a better mental map that shows you to the escape to a dimension where you don't have to be groping around anymore. In the meantime, even if you don't get to the escape, it gives you a better map of the room so that you don't have to keep bumping into things and hurting yourself.

But underlying all this is the realization that your perceptions—the way you represent the world to yourself, the way you represent yourself to yourself—are the fruits of actions and they will lead to other actions. So as we're working on the meditation and developing new skills, new ways of acting, we're opening up the possibility for new ways of perceiving that'll get us closer and closer to the kind of happiness we really want—because this desire is what drives everything.

As the Buddha said, everything you experience, except for nibbana, is rooted in desire. Your intentions come from the basic desire for happiness. Your perceptions come from your desire for happiness. So keep reminding yourself that if you're not there at the ultimate happiness, maybe you can turn around and look at the way you perceive things: using the analogies the Buddha gives and looking at your own ability to turn things inside out.

As I was saying this afternoon, Ajaan Lee's way of dealing with insights and trying to develop new ways of thinking was just to ask himself, "Well, what would be the opposite of this, and to what extent could *that* be true, to what extent could that be useful?" And he found that things that originally may have seemed impossible suddenly became possible as you get your old perceptions out of the way.