

The Three Perceptions as Tools

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There are three main perceptions the Buddha has you pursue for the sake of developing dispassion, and it's important to remember that that's their purpose: dispassion. The perceptions are inconstancy, *anicca*, stress or suffering, *dukkha*, and not-self, *anattā*. Sometimes you hear them referred to as three characteristics, but the Buddha himself never referred to them in that way. He was less interested in looking at the characteristics of what things are, or in making statements about reality out there, and was more interested in developing perceptions that will have an impact on the mind—perceptions that are true as far as they go, and that focus on an aspect of reality to develop dispassion. In other words, we're not trying to arrive at the true nature of things. We're highlighting a true aspect of things as a way of freeing the mind. We apply the three perceptions to the five clinging-aggregates to induce dispassion for the aggregates so that we can let go of our clinging and stop suffering.

Now, as the Buddha said, the five aggregates do have their good side. They do offer pleasure. If they didn't offer any pleasure, we wouldn't latch on to them. But they can also be painful, and if we hold on to them, that adds more suffering on top of the pain.

So we apply the three perceptions to the clinging-aggregates—which are the first noble truth—so that we can complete the duty appropriate to that noble truth, which is to comprehend it to the point of dispassion.

In other words, we're applying these perceptions in the context of the four noble truths and their duties. It's important to remember this context. When we do, we understand what these perceptions are for and can get the best use out of them.

On their own, the perceptions could lead us to think or do just about anything. We could focus on the inconstancy of things and tell ourselves, "Well, let's grab what we can, while we can before they disappear." We could think about how things are inherently stressful and come to the conclusion that it's not worth the effort to work for pleasure. Just give up and accept the fact that things won't be any better than they are. We could think about how things are not-self and so they're out of our control: another reason to give up.

But that's using the perceptions wrongly. As the Buddha said, with the perception of inconstancy, the test for how well you're developing it is: How do you regard things like gain, honor, and fame? If you use the perception of

inconstancy in order to see through these things, to the point where you feel no inclination to go for them at all, then you're using the perception rightly.

Then there's the perception of stress in what's inconstant. Here, the test is if the perception makes you sensitive to the dangers of laziness, the dangers of indolence, the dangers of heedlessness, the dangers of not committing yourself to the path or of not reflecting as you commit yourself to the path. The dangers, of course, come down to the fact that if you're lazy, you're setting yourself up for more suffering. If you're sensitive to these dangers, then you're likely to put more energy in the practice, and you're using the perception rightly.

Now, with both of these perceptions—inconstancy and stress—we're applying them in the light of the fact that there *is* something that's constant, there is something that offers true happiness. There's nibbana.

In order to appreciate nibbana, you have to look at the down side of the things that would pull you in another direction. In order to stick with the path to nibbana, you have to look at the downside of any clinging that would get in the way. In other words, think again of the context of the four noble truths. There is that third noble truth, the opening to nibbana, the opening to unbinding. And it's because of that third noble truth—and because there's a fourth noble truth taking you there—that it makes sense to apply these perceptions in the way the Buddha recommends that we do. If it weren't for that possibility, the perceptions themselves would have no duties of their own. The duties come from the four noble truths.

Similarly with the perception of not-self in what is stressful. The Buddha said that you're applying it rightly as long as you don't create any sense of self around things that are stressful, don't create any sense of self at all. This is what it's aimed at: It's aimed at our ultimate act of clinging, our act of selfing—what the Buddha calls “I-making and my-making, and the tendency to conceit.” We have to see that we're actually doing these things. The Buddha's less concerned with the question of whether you have a self or don't have a self. In fact, that's a question he puts aside. He's more concerned with how are you creating a sense of self? And is it skillful? When it's not, how can you stop clinging to it?

Now, there is a provisional sense of self that you need to use on the path: the sense that you're competent to do the path, and that you're going to benefit from it. That's an area where, for the time being, you don't apply the perception of not-self to your virtue, concentration, or discernment.

Particularly with concentration: Some people see their concentration come and go, and they decide that that's insight—concentration is inconstant, stressful, not-self, out of your control. But that's a misapplication of the perception. After

all, we're here to not be lazy, to commit ourselves to the practice of concentration, to reflect on the practice of concentration as we're committed to it so that it becomes a skill.

It's interesting: that pairing of commitment and reflection appears again and again in the Canon, but it often goes unnoticed. It starts with the teachings to Rahula. You commit yourself to a path of harmlessness, and then you reflect on your actions—how harmless are you, really? If you see that you're causing harm, you stop. So the Buddha wants us to not be lazy. He wants us to be heedful. He wants us to commit ourselves to the practice, and to reflect.

It's when we've developed the path all the way: That's when we apply the perception of not-self even to the path—to any lingering sense of “I am” that may be around the activities of concentration and even discernment.

So the distinction between seeing these as three perceptions and three characteristics is important. If we regard them as characteristics, as statements about the way things are, in and of themselves, that are meant to be used across the board, that would actually get in the way of doing the path. They could become reasons for laziness and inaction. But if we regard them as perceptions for uprooting our clinging, we can apply them at the right time and place, they actually encourage us to put more energy into our practice.

You look at the things you could go for in the world that would get in the way of the practice, and you realize that there's nothing there worth going for. But there is a path to the deathless. You look at the stress that's involved in holding on to the ways of the world, and that gives you more encouragement, not just to follow the path, but also to be diligent in following the path, to commit yourself to the path. Then when the path is fully developed and it's time to let go, *that's* when you apply the perception of not-self. And when these three perceptions have done their work, you reflect on the fact that they, too, are fabrications, and then you can put them all down. That's how you reach something totally unfabricated that even these perceptions can't touch. That's when you can rest.

The image the forest ajaans give is of being a carpenter, working on a chair. You pick your tools up when you need them, and you put them down when you don't. When you need a saw, you don't pick up a hammer. When you need a hammer, you don't pick up a saw. You pick up the right tools at the right time, and you put them down at the right time. Then when you're done, you put them all down. You've arrived at what you want, which is having a well-made chair. You've got a good place to sit now, a good place to rest. Or as Ajaan Lee would say, “We use right views on the path, but nibbana has no need for right views or wrong views—has no need for views at all.” It's because you've arrived.