

## *Perception*

*July 14, 2023*

This morning I saw some raccoon tracks up on the pad at the top of the hill. It was on a part of the pad that I had swept the night before, and it was because I had swept the area that I could actually perceive the raccoon tracks, in both senses of the word *perceive*: one, to detect that they were there, and two, to be able to identify them.

The Thai ajaans like to use this as an analogy: You sweep the monastery, get everything clean, so that you can detect what's coming and going in the monastery. In the same way, you try to sweep your mind clean—developing your mindfulness, your concentration, getting the mind still—so that you can perceive things arising in the mind. If greed comes, you want to be able to perceive it very early on. Lust comes, you want to perceive it very early on. Any unskillful emotion: If the mind is quiet, you can perceive it.

The two senses of the word in English—to detect something and to identify it—are actually two separate words in Pali. The first, simply acknowledging the presence of something, would be an act of *viññāna*, consciousness. You cognize it.

The perceiving, *sañña*, is the act of identifying. Of course, it was more than just having the pad swept that allowed me to identify those tracks. I had to remember that these are the characteristics of these kinds of tracks. These kinds of tracks are raccoon tracks.

Some people limit the word *sañña* simply to memory, but there's more going on in the process than just that. You're able to identify something right in front of you in the present moment. It is based on memory—you remember that certain characteristics mean this or that—but then you also apply that knowledge right here, right now to recognize what's going on.

We see this often in the Vinaya. A lot of the offenses are defined by how you perceive the object you get involved with. For instance, if you touch a woman, you have lustful intent in doing it, and you perceive that she is a woman, then the offense is one thing. If you perceived her as something else—such as a man or a mannequin—then the offense would be much less. This is not a matter of simply memory: You're not just remembering whether it was a man or a woman. What matters is how you identify what you're touching while you're touching it.

As you live by the rules and get to think of your actions in terms of the rules, you see that they place a lot of emphasis on this role of perception: how you identify what you're dealing

with, and how important it is to get your perceptions right.

There was a case of a monk who, seeing a pile of clothes on a chair, perceived it just as a pile of clothes and sat down very forcefully on top of it. But it turned out that there was a baby child wrapped up in the pile of clothes, and the child died. In this case, the Buddha said, before you sit down always make sure what you're sitting down on.

In other words, check your perceptions to make sure they're right. It's not simply a matter of figuring out what there is around you, but also thinking about the meaning, or value of what's around you.

This is reflected in the Thai definition of the word *sañña*: *cam dai, maai ruu*. *Cam dai* means to recognize or remember something. *Maai ruu* means to label it and to determine what it means.

In the case of the footprints on the pad, the fact that it was a raccoon meant nothing much, just that we have to be careful: Raccoons can steal things, but they're no real danger. However, if the tracks were grizzly bear or wolverine tracks, that would be another matter. We'd have to live in a different way because there are more dangerous animals around. It's in this element of what the perception means, or how you perceive the value of what you perceive, that perception plays such a huge role in the practice.

Another teaching from the *ajānas* is that when you focus on the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness—you can start out with any one of the five and it will give you insight into all the rest. For instance, you can focus on the body, analyze your attachment to the body, and it will start spreading around to feelings and perceptions and fabrications and consciousness as well. In fact, what's important is how it goes to your perceptions.

You look at how contemplation of the body goes. It's all a matter of learning how to perceive the body as not worthy of attachment. We come in with the perception that it *is* worthy of attachment. We correctly identify it. We know it's a body, but we have a wrong perception about its meaning and value.

So we contemplate the parts of the body. We contemplate the drawbacks of the body, in terms of its many potential illnesses. We learn to develop the perception of its being inconstant, stressful, not-self, and unattractive, all in order to change our ideas about its value. After all, it's through the value that we get attached to it. If we learn to perceive it as having not much value at all—at least not much value in terms of how our lust or pride might want to

value it—then the attachment goes away.

The body does have value as something we can use in the practice, so we take care of it just enough to keep it going, so that we can continue our practice in relatively good health. That's a correct evaluation for the body. But to get there requires that you strip away a lot of your other wrong evaluations.

The same goes with feeling. As we're sitting here, sometimes we deal with feelings of pain, and as long as you identify the pain, perceive the pain as being the same thing as the part of the body in which it's located, it's going to be very difficult to not suffer from it. Your perception that it has invaded the body you claim as yours is what creates the bridge between the physical pain and your mental pain.

So one of the instructions in dealing with physical pain is to ask yourself, "Is the physical pain the same thing as the body?" The body of course, is the four elements. Pain is something else, but we've glommed the two together. So how do you un-glom them? One way is to ask yourself, "Where is the sharpest point of the pain right now?" Instead of running away from the pain, go toward it, be proactive, and you'll see that the sharpest point moves around. You keep following it around and around and around, and there's a weird sense that "Yes, the pain does separate out from the body"—so much so that it's as if they're no longer in the same place anymore. When you separate them out, sometimes the pain stays there, and other times it disappears. What's really weird is that sometimes it slips into your heart and disappears there, which shows how much a role the perception plays in your experience of the pain.

So no matter which of the aggregates you focus on, it always seems to come down to perception, and especially that perception of value, the perception of meaning.

This relates to Venerable Sāriputta's answer to the question: "When you go to a foreign land and intelligent people ask you, 'What does the Buddha teach?' how do you answer them?" His first answer was, "He teaches the end of passion and desire." If the people asking the question are intelligent, they'll then ask, "Passion and desire for what?" His answer: "The five aggregates." "Why is that?" "Because if you have passion for these things, then when they change, you're going to suffer. But if you don't have passion for them, then no matter how much they change, you're not going to suffer."

He's boiling the Buddha's teachings down to a value judgment: The aggregates are unworthy of passion. This, of course, is an issue of perception. If you see these activities—and they are activities, the aggregates are not things, they're activities—if you see them as worthy of

pursuing, you're not going to let go, you're going to keep doing them again and again. But when you begin to see that they don't provide the happiness you want, and particularly when you learn about the happiness that can come when you do let go—which is what the third noble truth is all about—then you see they're not worth pursuing. And you don't have to suffer from them anymore.

So the practice is a matter of training your perceptions. It's a matter of training your perceptions not only to be able to identify what aggregate is, but also: What is it worth?

This is where the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self come in: to call into question the worth of these things, the meaning you give to them. When you can use these perceptions to let go of the aggregates—including even skillful perceptions—then you open to something that's even greater than you can imagine, in which there's no perception, but there is the greatest happiness possible.

So perception plays a huge role in the practice, both in identifying what's what, and learning to retrain your perceptions of the value and meaning of what's what. If you focus here, you find that you can accomplish a lot in freeing the mind from its attachments, which are based on mistaken perceptions, and developing perceptions that allow you to let go.

Of course eventually you have to let go of all perceptions because they, too, are aggregates. But that's simply a part of the strategic approach the Buddha takes: You use the aggregates to get beyond the aggregates. Then you let them go.

When I was teaching in Canada last November, one of the people at the retreat was saying that she had been told that we can't change our perceptions, which is probably one of the most un-Buddhist teachings you can imagine. It's because we *can* change our perceptions—learning how to identify the world in a new way, learning how to identify its value in a new way—that the whole idea of learning the teachings and practicing the teachings makes sense. It's because we can change our perceptions that we can be free.