

Guo Gu

*Meditation Month 2021: Silent Illumination*

Week 3: "Contemplate and Perceive"

March 15, 2021



Hello, my name is Guo Gu. Welcome back to the third week of Tricycle's Meditation Month. I hope all of you have been practicing well. This week, we'll be talking about direct contemplation and the nature of perception.

Buddhism teaches that the mind is the forerunner of everything. Everything is created by the mind. Now, on a superficial level, what does it mean that everything is created by the mind? It means everything is *mediated* by the mind. We have to first be able to imagine the world we want to live in to create the world that we want to live in. We have to be able to think up the things we want to use that are convenient for our lives in order for us to invent them, to fabricate them. So, in essence, the mind is the forerunner of everything.

But Buddhism goes a step further and says that everything is actually created, constructed, and filtered through perception. For example, take suffering, anguish. The degree of our suffering really depends on our perception. Many of you may be beginners in meditation practice. So if someone were to force you to put your legs in a pretzel shape, in a cross-legged posture, you would feel great suffering, right? But if you willingly assumed that same posture, knowing that something good is going to come out of it, you may be able to sit quite comfortably. So your experience is actually shaped by your perception. If someone's calling you some name, maybe a not-so-good slur, your perception of that person mediates how you're processing those words. So everything is constructed by your mind.

Yet on another level, neuroscientists have said that 90 percent of what we experience is actually created by consciousness, for example, sight. We only need 10 percent of stimulation from the outside world. So what would that be? Right now light is feeding back to the occipital cortex, the visual cortex. So the neural pathway to that is actually singular, yet there are a lot of neural pathways from the visual cortex, the occipital cortex, back to the thalamus and other areas of the brain; a lot of pathways mediate that experience. So, neuroscientists say that we have never actually lived outside of this brain inside this dark shell of the skull. Information comes in through the neural transmitters as sensory data. It is our brain that experiences, figures out, anticipates, and projects what might happen, that leads to our experience. This anticipatory interoceptive process they call it is moment to moment to moment to moment.

For example, take eating a green apple. You take a bite. You are astonished—it is so sweet! Why would you be astonished? Because prior to that taste your brain has already predicted, "Green apple? Maybe a little bit sour." So all that happens at an unconscious level. Our brain moves so fast that it's able to fill in all of this extra information, predicting what's going to happen. So that's called the interoceptive process.

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Now, the brain has never lived outside its shell. It depends on sensory information and it constantly predicts and makes adjustments; learning, learning. So, the perhaps scary thing is we have never lived in the world out there. It's not to say that there is no world out there, it's just that we've never lived in it.

Instead of the interoceptive process the neuroscientists talk about, Buddhism talks about perception in terms of kind of perceptual image or mark or representation—that everything we experience, through sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch is actually replicated, simulated by the mind's image. We call that *akara*, that's a Sanskrit word. What it's saying is our experience of the world is not actually of the world out there, the sensory world. We're actually experiencing this perceptual image, and then responding to it.

So, Buddhism talks about what constitutes a human being: forms, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. Form is the body or the sense faculties. Sensation can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Perception or conception are the labels—words, language, discriminations—that we impute or overlay on to our sensation. And then volitions, on the basis of that we act on the body, speech, and mind. And consciousness is that which is like a repository in which all of our sensory experiences or impulses or actions are deposited in this mental continuum. It's like a bag. So the things we put in this bag shapes our next moment of experience. So if most of the things in your bag are grumpy, self-victimizing, always other people's problem causing me to be vexed, you know, if the same type of karmic imprints that you're depositing in this mental continuum, then that will probably shape your next moment, how you interpret the world. So most of us have a mixed bag of things. So that's the five *skandhas*.

The perceptual imprint happens between the raw sensation, or when we experience the world through the sense faculties, and conception. It's a nonverbal, nonlinguistic ability of the mind. It is even prior to the acknowledgement of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, even before that. So the instantaneous experience of sight. The ability the minds actually construct, simulate, what it's actually seeing. And everyone's different. On the basis of that, we overlay it with our discrimination, words and language and so, constructs. So in that sense, everything is actually a construct of the mind. So there's a particular school in Buddhism called the consciousness only school that elaborates on this in greater detail. But what I've introduced here is just the basic gist of it.

The reason we need to understand this is this: usually, when we have a problem with the world out there, or with people out there, we think it is actually the world and the people that's causing us to have problems. Buddhism teaches that it is your idiosyncratic simulation, based on your

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karmic propensity, patterns, and habits, that simulates the world as you see it in that instantaneous moment on which—if that's not bad enough—on which we overlay with our ruminations and constraints and self narrative, all based around "me," "I," "mine." What's good for me and what's not. So in that instantaneous moment of perception, we're actually bringing all of our past. We're bearing witness to all of our past in that moment of perception. And we're reacting to that.

So in a sense, we're reacting to our own karmic propensity. Why? Because when someone says something to us, if we don't even understand the language, we have no emotional reaction to what they said. None. Say you understand the language; if someone says something to you, it means something. To another person, it means something totally different, their reaction is completely different. Why is that? Because we bring our own baggage to the picnic, we bring our own food to the potluck. And that food is that baggage, habit, propensity of mental continuum. So it's important to know and to recognize that most of our perceptions are actually invalid. Invalid. We don't actually see things as they are. That brings a level of humility. Now, it's not to say that there is no world out there or there are no problems out there. It's to have the humility, to appreciate that this is my perception.

So we take full responsibility for what we experience. Once we can take full responsibility, then we can do something about it. First, we change ourselves so that we are free (or freer) from our own biases, then we can work toward a better environment, a better world for everyone. So, the training for this is focusing on sight and sound. Why? Because most of our vexations, suffering, anguish, discrimination, habits, are with what we see and the things that we hear. So it's very important to work on these two. The practice is called direct contemplation.

I just spoke about the theory of Buddhist notions of perception, epistemology actually, and here's the practice, which is actually quite simple. We have to first build on the foundations of what we have already learned, of progressive relaxation; you have to be able to ground yourself. Because, like I said, if your body is in a particular state, your breath will definitely match that particular state, and the mind will be impacted as well. So you want to prime the body and breath in your particular state to access the very subtle level of transforming your perception. So you always have to master this progressive relaxation, grounding yourself, being in tune with the body, being embodied in the body, through the body, we practice this. Not here in the head. That's the first step.

Second, adjust the undercurrent feeling tone. If the body is tense, you will not be able to access it, because the defense mechanism is up. So you have to defuse the defense mechanism by relaxing the body so you can access how you actually feel. And once the body is relaxed,

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centered, grounded, you should feel content, needing nothing from the outside, nothing to relinquish, to let go. Being at ease. Allow yourself a few minutes to resonate in that. Allow that contentment and pleasant experience to percolate and then see how you feel in that moment.

Then for the period of meditation, try this. Choose an object of meditation, either sight or sound, but that object must be consistent. That's your meditation object. You can't choose something that's constantly being interrupted, like birds chirping. Sometimes they're chirping, sometimes not. What do you do if there's no sound of the birds anymore? So you've got to choose something constant. For sight, perhaps a blade of grass, a prairie, or just an object. It has to be steady. For sound, you have to choose something that's constant so the meditation object is always present. Next, ground in your body, feeling the presence of your body rooted to Earth. Suspend words, language, discrimination, comparison, labels, and naming. In other words, "don't know." This mind of not knowing, openness, wordless. Just experiencing the sight.

We may have a habit of labeling, "I'm looking at this, I'm looking at that." It's natural. Recognize, expose, and allow those words and labels and naming to disintegrate back into this not knowing. Just experiencing. Suspending, bracketing, this discriminating mind. So, in other words, rest in that immediacy of direct valid perception, which is the immediacy of that perceptual representation in that moment. We're not really grabbing, holding on to a meditation object out there. The understanding is this is my perceptual image, my construct in that immediacy. So, what you need to do is stay with the freshness of that moment instant by instant by instant. Freshness. Wakeful. In time, more and more, the majority of what you actually experience is less than less the things actually out there. But this moment's freshness of that perception.

So, this is maybe kind of hard to understand, but you have to practice it to get what I'm saying, okay. So, understanding how perception works is very important. Our construct, our simulation. In practicing, grounding ourselves, rooted, content, neither grasping nor rejecting, neither chasing things nor trying to get rid of anything. Staying in that freshness, in that moment. Okay, so that is the actual practice. So experience that and we'll come back in the live calls, and we can discuss any questions you may have.

Next week, we will learn silent illumination proper. So all these things that we're learning are kind of building up. They are building blocks to silent illumination practice. So it's very important to practice this. So see you next week.