

Bonnie Duran

*Mistaking a Stick for a Snake: What the Buddha Taught About Inherent Bias*

Week One: “The Mind’s Four Distortions”

November 6, 2017



My name is Bonnie Duran and I live right now in Seattle, Washington. I'd like to say a little bit about how I met the dharma before I give my talk.

I'm a very grateful and humble recipient of the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and the American Indian movement. I'm a first generation college student, so neither of my parents were able to go to college, but most of my siblings went to college.

I went to undergraduate school at San Francisco State University in San Francisco, where I grew up. After I graduated, many of my beloved white friends were doing what a lot of European Americans do after they graduate from college: they take the perfunctory trip to Europe for the summer. I thought, *Hey, I would like to do that, I would like to go to Europe for the summer*, but I didn't have any money. I bought a one-way ticket to a place I knew I could work: a skiing resort run by the U.S. military. I moved to Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Germany. There, I met all these wonderful expats from all over the world and they said in your traveling experience you should go to Asia. Asia is so different and so wonderful. It's definitely worth the trip to go check it out.

I planned to do that. A few of my young friends from Garmisch and I decided to go to Asia, Nepal, and India. I hitchhiked to Berlin and took a plane over to Nepal. All my friends told me, *You should check yourself into monastery because Asia is so different*. You're going to want to do something to just get used to being in a different place.

I took myself into the Kopan Monastery by Swayambhunath outside of Kathmandu, Nepal. I felt like I had come home. It was just so wonderful. I heard the dharma and I just knew that it was the truth.

I was hanging out with a lot of Tibetans and indigenous Nepalese people. I had worked in Indian country before. I'm a mixed race American-Indian person and worked predominantly in urban Indian and tribal communities. I saw the Tibetans with the turquoise and coral—they felt like

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relatives to me. They felt the same way about me. It was interesting. They were really shocked that I was an American.

This was in 1982: I guess back then there weren't a lot of Americans that looked like me traveling around Asia. They would tell me to be quiet and they would march me up to some of their friends, and their friends will look at me and they'd say, "Where do you think she's from?" They would say "Maybe Bhutan? Maybe up the road in Pokhara? I don't know, where *is* she from?" Then I would start speaking with my American accent and they would all just giggle and laugh and say, "Wow. There are Americans that look like you." It was a real treat to let people of color in Asia know that the U.S. is a pretty diverse place.

I met the dharma there: my very first dharma retreat was a month [I spent] at Kopan Monastery with the absolutely wonderful Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe. I was able to take teachings with Lama Yeshe. From there, I headed over to Bodhgaya, which is a very sacred place in our tradition as well, and I was able to take teachings there in the Theravada tradition. I was able to also hear His Holiness speak. Every January, he used to do trainings in Bodhgaya for Tibetans.

I [encountered] vipassana, [or insight meditation, drawn from] the Theravada tradition, in Bodhgaya—that has been my predominant tradition ever since. I really love mindfulness meditation: *satipatthana sati*. I have gone through the ranks in our Western Theravada tradition at Insight Meditation Society and Spirit Rock Meditation Center, and now I am a vipassana (mindfulness) retreat teacher.

I also have a regular full-time job because I met mindfulness when I was pretty young. We know from all the neuroscientific and psychological research around mindfulness that it makes you really smart.

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After I came back from Asia—I’d been away for six or seven years—I came back to the United States to do a doctorate degree at UC Berkeley. In addition to being a mindfulness retreat teacher, I’m also a professor in the schools of social work and public health at the University of Washington.

Actually, I’m very honored and humbled to say that I’m also teaching a class at Sitting Bull College in the Standing Rock Nation. I am also engaging with all of our native indigenous relatives across the U.S. It’s so interesting. When I go out to work with tribal communities, they become my research partners. I do psychiatric epidemiology but they know of my background and they say, “Yeah, that’s great but what about the mindfulness?” There’s so much resonance between indigenous ways of knowing, indigenous epistemologies, and mindfulness, or this way of knowing.

Today, I want to talk a little bit about this wonderful, one of my favorite suttas, if you can have a favorite sutta. This one sutta is called *Vipallasa Sutta*. It’s pretty short.

This is in *Anguttara Nikaya*, 4.49:

"These four, [that follow, below] O Monks, are distortions of perception, distortions of thought, distortions of view:

- [1] Sensing no change in the changing,
- [2] Sensing pleasure in suffering,
- [3] Assuming self where there is no self,
- [4] Sensing the unlovely as lovely—

Gone astray with wrong views, beings  
Misperceive with distorted minds.

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Bound in the bondage of Mara,  
Those people are far from safety.  
They’re beings that go on flowing:  
Going again from death to birth.

But when in the world of darkness  
Buddhas arise to make things bright,  
They present this profound teaching  
Which brings suffering to an end.

When those with wisdom have heard this,  
They recuperate their right mind:

They see change in what is changing,  
Suffering where there’s suffering,  
“Non-self” in what is without self,  
They see the unlovely as such.

By this acceptance of right view,  
They overcome all suffering.”

That is the *Anguttara Nikaya’s Vipallasa Sutta*, or the distortions of perception, thought, and view. I really love this sutta, because I think it explains a lot happening with us individually and collectively.

According to the Buddhist teachings, this distortion is caused by a very basic flood in our lives: a flood of *avidya* or ignorance. Ignorance is the cause of those four misperceptions. In this *Vipallasa Sutta*, these four misperceptions are thought to arise as at three levels. These levels are

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the distortions of perception, distortions of thoughts, and distortions of view. I want to talk a little bit about the four vipallasas at these three levels.

First, the level of perception. We look around in our lives and we see a chair; we name it a chair. When we see sunlight, we name it sunlight. When we look around we apply these conceptual overlays to things in our lives. We take them to be real. We take them to exist on their own. It would be as if you believed in a creator, and that the creator had a three-by-five card in heaven that said, “This is what it means to be Bonnie,” or “This is what a chair is.” We know that that's not necessarily true. We can examine the truth of our perceptions based on what these four *vipallasas* [distortions] are.

In the realm of perception, the Buddha taught that there are six-fold ways we perceive the world. We see forms through our sight. We hear sounds—sound is a form of perception—and we smell things, and we taste things, and we have perceptions associated with bodily context. We have perceptions related to mental objects that we see in our mind. Our mind is a place of perception within us.

These vipallasas, these distortions, they have different [names]. In the English language we might have other ways to describe them. They also mean hallucinations and delusions, erroneous observations, illusions, phantoms, mirages, and fantasies. They are absolutely connected with a lot of bias and exaggeration, misinterpretation, and maybe a little bit more colloquially, they're called “baloney” or “slant,” “smoke,” and “story” and sometimes they're just plain lies. This is ways of understanding the four vipallasas at these three levels: at the level of perception, thought, and view.

Distortions of perception is the first one, *sanna-vipallasa*. [This is when] we mistake something for something else. For example, we might be walking down the road and see a stick on the road and mistake it for a snake. Actually, that is one of the distortions found in the suttas. This distortion of perception can lead us to have certain thoughts, like, *Oh my gosh, there is a snake in*

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*the road, what else is around here? Are there ticks around here? Are there other dangers around here?* It will produce a lot of different thoughts related to that distortion of perception.

Then, this distortion of perception, this *sanna-vipallasa*, leads to distortions of thought, or *citta-vipallasa*. This points to the biggest, most difficult, and most hardened misperception that we have in our life: that's distortion of view, or *ditthi-vipallasa*. Ditthi-vipallasa is an inherent bias or slant that we have as we look at the world we live in. It [includes] ideas about people and places, and about things that inform our perception, how we evaluate what we're looking at: people and places and events anything in our conditioned world.

This ditthi-vipallasa, these distortions of view, have a huge impact in our lives. They are where a lot of avidya, a lot of ignorance, [comes from]. The source of all of the distortions is avidya, ignorance, and it informs our perceptions, thoughts, and views.

I really want to talk about the three levels of misperception, of distortion. The first level of distortion of course is distortion of perception, *sanna-vipallasa*. This is when we mistake something for something else. It's considered to be the “lightest” level of perception, or the one that is most easily rectified.

For example, if I'm walking down the street, and I see a stick in the road, I might misperceive it and think it's a snake. I might have a startled or traumatic response to it, depending on my past experiences with wild animals. If I have the fortitude, or the *sati*, the mindfulness, I can bring “right seeing” to this moment: I can look again and see that this is actually a stick and not a snake. It's not something that's going to harm me.

We often have those types of perceptions, distorted perceptions, in our lives. We might see certain things, like the sutta says, and we might take things as lasting that are not lasting. For example, if we're walking around and we see something in a store, the perception is that it's lovely and beautiful—we might also have the perception that it will bring lasting happiness. This

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is what I need to fulfill some part of my life. I need this one sweater or I need that pair of shoes or I need this rib roast or perhaps these dry cherries (which we all love).

We see these things and perceive them with certain distortions. We think that they are permanent. We think that what they have to offer is lovely and wonderful. We think that there is a solid self here that has certain likes and dislikes, certain proclivities for things out in the material world that have [particular] characteristics. They're lovely and they're beautiful. We perceive things as lasting, and we perceive them as satisfying, and we perceive them as somehow contributing to the happiness of a self that has defined likes and dislikes that can be satisfied by the external world and conditioned experiences. These distortions of perception are the first level of vipallasa.

Another way that we distort the world is that we see certain people as more valuable to us. As an old woman of color, I can tell you: I'm often invisible in environments, which is much of the time absolutely fine with me. Other times, when I'm sent to do a particular task or perform something, this can be counterproductive my task. This is true across Western culture.

Distortions of perceptions have an impact on who we see and the amount of worth that we attribute to them.

[In Western culture, we name distortions as] racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, [and so on]. These distortions of perception have an impact on whether we act with kindness whether we water the seeds of misperception and stratification—negative expressions of greed, hatred and delusion—not only at the individual level, but at the community and social level.

That is sanna-vipallasa, distortions of perception.