

Bonnie Duran

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

Week Two: “Discovering Our Distorted Views”

November 13, 2017



The second level of distortion is called *citta-vipallasa*, or distortion of thought. Most of the time these are triggered by distorted perceptions, the first vipallasa. We might be walking down the street and see a stick in the road and, through *sanna-vipallasa* [distortion of perception], we don't realize it's a stick and instead think it's a snake. Then all of a sudden that perception will give rise to a lot of thoughts. We might think, *Oh, my gosh! I'm in an unsafe environment. What is this snake doing here? Is that a poisonous snake? What other animals or environmental conditions are there that might not be safe for me?*

We look around with a heightened sense of alertness. It might make us feel unsafe in the environment, whether it's rural, urban, etc. We could remember to lock our door when we see a group of people as we're driving; that, too, is driven by perceptions that give rise to thoughts or ideas about the given moment. Most of the time, those perceptions are driven by the vipallasas. Somehow we think that something is dangerous around us when we have no idea whether it actually is or is not.

Citta-vipallasa is to think that things are permanent. In our workplace, school, or family we have thoughts about what's right and what's not right. We think that those things will last forever, whether they're good or not. Our ideas about what is causing any issues are very limited. We think: *This is why my partner and I are not getting along. This is why we shouldn't have kids. This is why we should move to another place.*

These thoughts are all based on perceptions that we have of the environment that we live in, an environment that is permanent, with equally permanent sources of pleasure or identity. That world bolsters the positive self and allows us to feed our egos with ideas about living in a certain place, having certain possessions, or having a certain family style. It all feeds the ideas we have about who we are. But all of those things—our relationships with our family, what's going on in a certain environment or community, the events in our work site, city, or town—are changing all the time. We're not able to see the change, however, when we have distorted thoughts. Our

Bonnie Duran

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

Week Two: “Discovering Our Distorted Views”

November 13, 2017



thoughts are distorted and [we] think that they're all permanent. [We] think [are thoughts are] somehow creating some permanent self in us. We think some things are satisfying, and if we just get more of those, we will be happy and content. Those are distortions of thought.

Finally, the biggest distortion is *ditthi-vipallasa*, the distortion of view. The Buddha had a lot to say about view. He said, “Anything that you can say about how things are, it is otherwise.” I love that. I think that that takes into consideration the distortions of perception and the three characteristics [also known as “the three marks of existence”—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self]. There is nothing that is inherently satisfying. There is no solid self that isn't conditioned by the external and internal worlds coming together in a cause and effect relationship.

There's nothing in our conditioned world that, if we just got a little bit more of [it] or a little bit less of [it], we would be absolutely satisfied and would need nothing else. That's not the nature of existence. That's not the nature of being a sentient being and that's exactly what the *Vipallasa Sutta* addresses—how these distortions get bound up in our lives.

One of the other wonderful teachings about the Vipallasa Sutta is that *ditthi-vipallasa*, distortion of view, is the most difficult distortion to uproot. It takes real insight and wisdom to uproot distorted view. We do this through our extended practice of daily mindfulness in order to see the truth of perceptions. We see that through the four foundations of mindfulness.

Mindfulness of the body helps us to uproot the idea of a consistently solid self that's not changing. It helps us uproot the way of seeing the self as inherently beautiful, ugly, or somehow able to provide us with the satisfaction of intimacy. One of the deepest distortions of view is that relationships with other human beings are inherently satisfying—that they will bring us inherent happiness through a deep intimacy that we want to have.

Bonnie Duran

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

Week Two: "Discovering Our Distorted Views"

November 13, 2017



It's been my experience that through practicing mindfulness, [meditation] retreats, and through practicing the Buddha's eightfold noble path we uproot these three basic distortions. When we're able to uproot and see through those, particularly the view of a solid self that exists regardless of causes and conditions, we let go of wanting to be a professor, a dharma teacher, or an elder in a community. We let go of wanting to be thought of in a certain way or to possess certain benefits or privilege in a society.

When we can let go of that we actually decondition and let go of egoic clinging. It's so fascinating to me that the most intimacy, the deepest satisfaction of interconnectedness—what we're really all looking for—is found when we have the opposite of what we thought we needed to get it.

The most intimacy I've had has been with people with levels of enlightenment because, in those situations, there aren't two people there. They've worked hard at letting go of the distorted perception of self. There is just interconnectedness. There is this and that cause and condition happening. It's been purified of greed, hatred, and delusion and there's only love and interconnectedness.

Other examples of distortions of perception, thought, and view can be found in stereotypes. We have ideas in our mind of what women and men are supposed to look like, what age they should be, what clothes they should wear, and what cars they should drive. We have a lot of stereotypes, ditthi-vipallasas, distortions of view, that have a very big impact on our perception. That's what we notice through practice. They say that we notice maybe 30 percent of what is in our environment; that amount is partly determined by the stereotypes, the distortions of view, that gauges what's worthy to look at.

Another common distortion is the halo effect. In this mode of perception, we see someone with characteristics that we deem as important and worthy; whatever they do becomes okay. Even if

Bonnie Duran

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

Week Two: “Discovering Our Distorted Views”

November 13, 2017



they say or do things that are against our fundamental value structures, we give them a pass. That is the halo effect.

First impressions of people that we carry with us are another example of a common distortion influenced by the belief that things don't change. We get a first impression of someone and just think that's the way they are—loving, kind, insightful, and wise, or bigoted, unkind, greedy, and ignorant. We think that that's the way people are forever, not realizing that, depending on who shows up and the surrounding conditions, people are changing all the time.