

Bonnie Duran

Mistaking a Stick for a Snake: What the Buddha Taught About Inherent Bias
Week Three: “Uprooting Our Distorted Views with Mindfulness”
November 20, 2017



[Welcome to Week 3.] Here's a little bit more on the Vipallasa Sutta from the Anguttara Nikaya:

Bhikkhus [monks], these are the four distortions—distortions of perception, distortions of thought, and distortions of view. What are the four? [1] Taking the impermanent as permanent is a distortion of perception, distortion of thought, and distortion of view. [2] Taking the painful as pleasurable, taking the unsatisfying as satisfying, *bhikkhus*, is a distortion of perception, a distortion of thought, and a distortion of view. [3] Taking the non-self as the self is a distortion of perception, a distortion of thought, and a distortion of view. [4] Taking the unattractive or unlovely as lovely or as pure, *bhikkhus*, is a distortion of perception, a distortion of thought, and a distortion of view.

There are four non-distortions. When we are seeing clearly, when our *sati*, our mindfulness, has led us to clarity, we see things as they really are—the four non-distortions.

The sutta continues, “*Bhikkhus*, these are the non-distortions. Non-distortions of perception, of thought, and non-distortion of view.” What are the four? Taking the impermanent (*anicca*) as permanent. [When we see] things [through] truth *anicca*—that changing nature of everything in our lives means seeing how things are changing—some slowly, some quickly—but all in movement.

The second non-distortion is taking the painful as painful or taking what is in the conditioned world as unsatisfying. “*Bhikkhus*, this is a non-distortion of perception, non-distortion of thought, and non-distortion of view.” One way to think about this is to realize the mistake in thinking that anything from our conditioned life—what we buy, our relationships, our degrees, our jobs, our appearance—will somehow provide us with lasting satisfaction.

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As a quality of this distortion, we water the seeds of greed, which is painful for ourselves, our communities, and painful for our greater society. We can see that on the social level. People think that accumulation—having more and more of something—is somehow a source of lasting satisfaction or intimacy. We know that that’s not true.

There's a wonderful theoretical view right now in our education called Southern epistemologies, epistemologies of the [global] south, that recognizes the several different approaches to collecting knowledge in the world. I believe that mindfulness is a Southern epistemology. It's a way of knowing from an East Asian tradition that has been marginalized up to the present. Now it's getting a lot more play but it's a different way of knowing than our regular conceptual, thinking minds. I believe that as we practice mindfulness as a way of knowing, going back to *citta* [heart/mind], our intuitive awareness, and connecting with our deepest values wisdom, we are expressing a form of cognitive justice.

The fourth misconception is, for me, the most difficult to understand. It's about taking the impure as pure and to understand the lovely as unlovely. I think this gets back to the forces of greed, aversion (or hatred), and delusion in all of our hearts. Those are three important forces that manifest in hundreds of different ways—one of those manifestations is mistaking something to be beautiful and lovely. It's an expression of our ignorance and not really understanding the true nature of things. Wisdom, on the other hand, makes us understand what is really our source of contentment and happiness.

We're told incessantly by our culture, our economics, and our system that some things are beautiful and lovely—that you should want to look a certain way, for example. You should want to own that. You should want to be this. That is one way to interpret what the Buddha said about a distortion of purity and loveliness. It’s a letting go of that ignorance and knowing that our happiness is really sourced in another place. It's sourced from the opposite of the three

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distortions, which is the understanding our deep interconnectedness. I love working in Indian country because many indigenous communities in the U.S. and beyond share the fundamental belief that we are all interconnected. We all are. We can't do one thing here that doesn't impact our relatives in South America.

In understanding the sense of *anatta* or not-self, we realize that we are an expression of nature. Just as one tree in a grove might be different than the one next to it, one is not more valuable than the other. They're just different expressions of the same fundamental element of “treeness,” whatever that would be. All the aspen trees in an aspen grove might look different above ground, but when you look underneath, there's only one root system.

That root system is an expression of our interconnectedness. The awareness that is present in me right now is the awareness that's present in all of you as well; it's an intuitive awareness. One of my teachers once said to me, “You know what your problem is, Bonnie? You don't give enough authority to that intuitive awareness.” [We must] come back to our intuitive sense and say, “What is needed now? What is happening now?” We don't let our conceptual mind answer that question. We're letting go over and over again while privileging and giving authority to a deeper sense of what is happening, as well as what is needed, now.

I like to say that mindfulness is the system of data collection that allows intuitive awareness to just see what is happening. In the first foundation [of mindfulness], see the changing nature of the four elements—air, earth, fire, and water—in the body. See the air element in your body's breathing and pushing; the earth element in the body's solidity and hardness; the fire element in the body's digestion and heat; and the water element in the body's blood and mucus.

See the truth of them just as elements happening in this body structure. Then, in the second foundation of mindfulness (feeling tone), notice what your body thinks is a pleasant feeling tone. See how that influences the vipassanas as well. We're always chasing after what is

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pleasant—pleasant to eat, pleasant to see, pleasant to hear, pleasant to taste—thinking that that feeling could be permanently satisfactory.

Also notice how we're always pushing running away from things that are unpleasant. Internal things—memories, thoughts, or ideas—that are unpleasant have a negative feeling tone to them. We don't allow them to arise and pass as everything does, but instead push them away from our awareness.

Neutral feeling tones distort our perception, thoughts, and views as well because, in that space of neutrality, we space out. And in that space, we want to create entertainment, which is where our stories come in about the present moment, adding either pleasant or even unpleasant feeling tones just to have a hint of experience.

Then, the third foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of thoughts and emotions. I think many of us who have practiced mindfulness realize that we shouldn't believe most of what we think. Our thoughts are often driven by greed for something pleasant or aversion to something that's happening in the world that we see as unpleasant. We should be able to see clearly what is happening with our thoughts and emotions and not take them to be personally inherent to us. We should realize that those are just mental objects, arising and passing away at any moment in our experience. We can make the decision to either follow our thoughts, watering our seeds [of suffering], or uproot them at the source. The third foundation of mindfulness is seeing clearly without stickiness and without associating thoughts and emotions with the self. We can have compassion for ourselves and refrain from believing and acting on our distorted thoughts.

The fourth foundation is the mindfulness of the five hindrances [desire, torpor, restlessness, ill-will and doubt]. In this practice of mindfulness, we can see how sleepiness and torpor influence our perceptions, our thoughts, and our views. We see how it's opposite, restlessness and worry, also influence our distortions of perception, thought, and view. We recognize, *I'm*

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really groggy and sleepy right now. I'm not seeing clearly. Or we might notice, *I'm really anxious and worried right now. I'm not seeing clearly.* We may also notice greed or aversion. We don't push away hindrances of greed or aversion; just see them and name them. [They're] not perfect, but they're not personal or permanent either. Then, similarly, we might see the hindrance of doubt, which is always questioning ourselves: *Am I doing this meditation right? Am I making the right decision?* These questions can actually lead to a lot of ambivalence in our lives. We don't want to commit to anything just because we're doubtful about whether or not it's worthy of our commitment.

Those are the five hindrances and the four foundations of mindfulness. Next, the seven factors of awakening are paths on the way to overcoming the distortions of perception, thought, and view. The first factor is mindfulness and the second is investigation—it's an interest in what is going on in this moment. With this interest, we don't take our distorted perceptions to be true but instead look a little bit deeper. Looking in this way, we actually see an energy that is natural and simply arises on its own. Both the energy that it takes to investigate and the ability to be present are always there. The combination of mindfulness, investigation, and effort leads to joy and wisdom.