

Bonnie Duran

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

Week Four: “Decolonizing Our Views”

November 27, 2017



In Buddhism’s eightfold path, to practice right view, *sammaditthi*, is to see the three characteristics of existence—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self—in all that we encounter and experience. Things are changing all of the time; some change quickly, others change slowly, but nothing is static. Nothing stands still. That is the first characteristic of existence.

The second characteristic is *dukkha*, often understood as “suffering” or “unsatisfactoriness.” This mark of existence asserts that there’s nothing in our conditioned world that can ever be permanent, nothing that can ever make us stop wanting. Wanting is really the source of our suffering. Such craving is the Buddha’s second noble truth—the truth of the cause of suffering.

The third characteristic of existence is that of non-self. In the third *vipallasa*, the distortion of view, we see ourselves and other beings as having solid, permanent selves. In reality, we’re not that. We can’t be defined by static concepts, for no conceptual overlay can get to the truth of who we are and the nature of existence. In this moment, however, we can simply understand this truth as the truth of interconnectedness—the connection that we have with all of nature and with all of life. As ordinary beings with the three mental distortions of perception, thought, and view, our lives become influenced by greed, hatred, and delusion. By coming to realize the three marks of existence, we begin to overcome those distortions.

For those of us who come from so-called “subordinate” social status, we can be particularly affected by the distortion of view—of seeing a solid self. It is important for us to use mindfulness practice to *decolonize* ourselves, meaning to break ourselves free from the inherent views in our society that say we’re less than or that we have to act or look a certain way to be accepted. These social distortions are not true. We are all expressions of the aspen tree in an inherently connected grove of aspens. Of course, one person may look different from another, just like one aspen may look different from the one next to it. But we are taught that this view of difference predates us; it conditions how we understand ourselves.

Bonnie Duran

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

Week Four: “Decolonizing Our Views”

November 27, 2017



One social view that has been particularly salient for me and for the tribal communities that I’ve worked in, largely because we’ve all been conditioned by it, is the doctrine of discovery.

According to this doctrine, which was a church edict released prior to [Christopher] Columbus’ adventures in the 1490s, if any explorer sailing from Europe encountered non-Christians in foreign lands, those people were not fully human. Under this view, all the European Christians therefore had every right to either enslave or kill such foreigners in order to occupy their land.

And that’s what happened to indigenous people in North and South America, the Pacific Islands, and in Africa. The indigenous peoples of these lands had other ways of knowing, other epistemologies, and other spiritual belief systems. But because of the doctrine of discovery, those ways of seeing the world changed into the European view.

We are still seeing the effects of the world’s global colonization. There is an almost invisible view, an inherent bias, that informs what we see socially in the United States and across the globe, which is why the American-Indian movement arose—to decolonize this view from within ourselves. This is why Black Lives Matter is so important—because it, too, is teaching all of us to decolonize the view of selves that are inherently inferior.

Such a view exactly reflects the distortions of aversion and delusion that the Buddha talked about. Unearthing the doctrine of discovery and feeling our own self-worth as women, old people, people of color, queer, trans, or fat—all of the things that are considered unlovely—decolonizes the distortion of perception. We accept ourselves as expressions of nature in this moment and understand our interconnectedness. We realize that the source of intimacy that we’re all striving for lies within the deconditioning of the egoic clinging and thoughts that drove the doctrine of discovery.

We will save ourselves once we realize how we’re all connected and that the decisions we make are not just for ourselves but are for all of us, the family of sentient beings.

Bonnie Duran

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

Week Four: “Decolonizing Our Views”

November 27, 2017



The Buddha taught *mana*, conceit in the self, is conditioned in four ways, all of which we can see in our own mind-body processes through the practice of *sati* [mindfulness]. The first condition of conceit is in birth (*citta-mana*). In the Buddha’s time [around 2,500 years ago], individuals who took birth in certain families or clans were thought to be better than others. We know what that looks like in Western culture today, too. Some people, depending on ethnicity, race, gender, physical size, and culture are given privilege; this is the form of our current conceit in self in the form of birth.

The second type of conceit is *dhana mana*, translated as “wealth conceit.” If we have more money than another being, we see ourselves as better. We construct identities around being persons of wealth, money, or privilege. One might think, *I can have anything that I want*. The opposite view of self, as a poor person, is equally a form of self-conceit. In this form one thinks, *I can’t have anything*, and they may see themselves lesser than or construct a victim identity. *I’m not as good as [wealthy people]; I can’t buy anything; I’m a victim of this economic structure*, an individual might think to themselves. But really, all people are the same. Who cares about 400 years of settler colonialism.

The third kind of self-conceit is *panna mana*, or conceit in the form of education or wisdom. I can see a lot of this third kind of *mana* in me. Oh my gosh! I’ve got a doctorate degree from UC Berkeley, so boy, I have a lot of that going on here. I’m a professor at a high-ranking institution in a school of social work that has excellent values. Wisdom/knowledge conceit is definitely a part of my identity. That’s just who I am—a college professor and a dharma teacher—so that is part of how I construct my vision of myself.

Opposite this form of knowledge-based conceit is the view of the self as not as smart or educated as others. We see this sometimes in the anti-intellectual social environment where people think, “You educated people think you are all better than us. Well, we’re going to show you! We have power too!” Such people then support certain political platforms that promise to support working

Bonnie Duran

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

Week Four: “Decolonizing Our Views”

November 27, 2017



class people who have less education, even though those political parties don't necessarily end up doing that.

Finally, the last kind of self-conceit takes form in one's perception of physical appearance—one's looks. Different cultures have different ideas about what is attractive and what is not, but we know that within Western culture to be attractive means to be young, thin, and pale. Any variation of that would be considered perhaps less attractive or less deserving of praise.

To sum up, by using mindfulness to examine the four forms of self-conceit within our very own lives we can see, and decondition, the vipallasas, or distortions of the mind. We observe how our conceptions of self conditioned by birth, money, knowledge, and looks influence, and harden, the ways that we view the world.

In Buddhist cosmology, our distortions of perception are the easiest to undo through the practice of mindfulness. Distortions of thought are more difficult. Distortions of view, the most hardened ways of seeing the world, are the most difficult to unravel, but we need to work to unearth them to see the truth of our self within this world clearly with wisdom.

In closing, I would just like to say that when we can see vipallasas in our perceptions, thought, and views, we might cringe. It's like we have aversion to the aversion. But if we look deeply, we see that we are not these separate distinct selves that we think we are. We are expressions of larger historical, social, cultural, and economic conditions that are constantly unfolding over time. When we these distortions within ourselves, we are deserving of our own love and kindness. The Buddha said you can look all over for someone more deserving of love and compassion than yourself—to the south, the north, east, and west—but you will not find anyone because we are as worthy as anyone else.

Bonnie Duran

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

Week Four: “Decolonizing Our Views”

November 27, 2017



All we need to do is see our distortions. We don't need to do anything more, for by seeing them, wisdom uproots them. We just do our practice and be patient, watering the seeds of mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.