

Anguttara Nikaya 4.49 — Vipallasa Sutta: Inversions (translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi)

“Bhikkhus, there are these four inversions of perception, inversions of mind, and inversions of view. What four? (1) The inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes the impermanent to be permanent; (2) the inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes what is suffering to be pleasurable; (3) the inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes what is non-self to be self; (4) the inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes what is unattractive to be attractive. These are the four inversions of perception, mind, and view.

“There are, bhikkhus, these four non-inversions of perception, non-inversions of mind, and non-inversions of view. What four? (1) The non-inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes the impermanent to be impermanent; (2) the non-inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes what is suffering to be suffering; (3) the non-inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes what is non-self to be non-self; (4) the non-inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes what is unattractive to be unattractive. These are the four non-inversions of perception, mind, and view.”

Perceiving permanence in the impermanent,
perceiving pleasure in what is suffering,
perceiving a self in what is non-self,
and perceiving attractiveness in what is unattractive,
beings resort to wrong views,
their minds deranged, their perception twisted.

Such people are bound by the yoke of Māra,
and do not reach security from bondage.
Beings continue in samsāra,
going to birth and death.

But when the Buddhas arise in the world,
sending forth a brilliant light,
they reveal this Dhamma that leads
to the stilling of suffering.

Having heard it, wise people
have regained their sanity.
They have seen the impermanent as impermanent
and what is suffering as suffering.

They have seen what is non-self as non-self
and the unattractive as unattractive.
By the acquisition of right view,
they have overcome all suffering.

Translator's Note from Andrew Olendzki:

‘These verses from the Numerical Discourses give the traditional list of the *vipallasas*. This Pali word is sometimes translated as "perversions" of the mind; but I find this language too strong and prefer the expression "distortions" of the mind.

The term is composed of a prefix (*vi-*) which carries the sense of division, separation or removal; another prefix (*pari-*) meaning around, or complete (as in our related word peri-meter); and a verb (*-as*) which can be taken as meaning "to throw." Putting all this together, we have the image of the mind taking something up, turning it around, and throwing it back down — a perversion or distortion of reality by the perceptual and cognitive apparatus of the brain.

The distortions are fundamental to the Buddhist notion of ignorance or delusion. It is not that we are inherently flawed in our nature, it is just that we make some serious errors on many levels as we attempt to make sense of the world around us. As we come to recognize — through meditation practice — some of the ways we misconstrue things about our experience, we become more able to correct for these errors and gain greater clarity.

The distortions of the mind work on three levels of scale. First, distortions of perception (*sañña-vipallasa*) cause us to misperceive the information coming to us through the sense doors. We might mistake a rope by the path as a snake, for example. Normally such errors of vision are corrected by a more careful scrutiny, but sometimes these sensory mistakes are overlooked and remain.

Distortions of thought (*citta-vipallasa*) have to do with the next higher level of mental processing, when we find ourselves thinking about or pondering over things in our minds. The mind tends to elaborate upon perception with these thought patterns, and if our thoughts are based upon distortions of perception, then they too will be distorted.

Eventually such thought patterns can become habitual, and evolve into distortions of view (*ditthi-vipallasa*). We might become so convinced that there is a snake by the path that no amount of evidence to the contrary from our own eyes or reason, nor the advice of others, will shake our beliefs and assumptions. We are stuck in a mistaken view.

Furthermore, these three levels of distortion are cyclical — our perceptions are formed in the context of our views, which are strengthened by our thoughts, and all three work together to build the cognitive systems which make up our unique personality.

You will no doubt recognize that the particular distortions mentioned in this text correspond to the three characteristics. Taking what is impermanent (*anicca*) as permanent, what is inherently unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) as a source of satisfaction, and what is without a self (*anatta*) to constitute a self — these are the primary ways we distort reality to the profound disadvantage of ourselves and others. Seeing the un-lovely (*asubha*) as lovely rounds out the traditional list of four *vipallasas*.

I like the way these verses say that when under the influence of these distortions we have "lost our senses" (*vi-saññino*) and our mind is "broken" or "thrown" (*khitta-citta*). When the distortions are

corrected by right view, clear thinking and careful perception, then the text says that we have "gotten back" (*pacca-latthu*) our "true mind" (*sa-citta*).

This is the Buddhist view of mental disease and mental health. Delusion is a mental illness that causes all sorts of suffering; mental health can be restored by correcting the flaws in how the mind operates. Fortunately, "Buddhas arise to make things bright" and illustrate in detail how this recovery of our natural health can be accomplished.'

Being Mindful of Race: Understanding the Cycle of Misperception (book excerpt) by Ruth King

The racial ignorance and distress we see in the world today is a reflection of the mind playing itself out in grand scale on the big screen, projecting our collective conscious and unconscious conditioning.

Every one of our lives represents a mosaic, with many shades, shadows, and shapes of experiences. In our relational world of vast diversity, kinship, and division, we have all been racially conditioned, trained through many generations in how to perceive race—our own and that of others. For example, when we look at people, we often reduce them to a concept or a summation of their group identity by saying or thinking superficially: "He's a gay guy" or "She's an Asian woman" or "They are black or white." So much is driven by the perceptions we have and by now these perceptions then feed certain thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. However, we were not meant to be simple summations or to be seen with casual eyes. We must be willing to look closer to see what else is there—to see beyond the glossy print of fixed perceptions to the nuances, the subtle gradation, the treasure in the understated, even the forbidden. This discernment begins within our minds and hearts. We can become more mindful of our perceptions and use them as invitations to look more deeply at our racial habits of mind.

Buddhist teachings refer to misrepresentations as perceptual knots—ways of viewing that block freedom and keep us entangled in knotty thoughts. These misperceptions include our attachments, aversions, distortions, and delusions. They keep us thinking that life is personal and permanent and that it should be perfect. One teaching in particular, the Vipallasa Sutta, speaks to the reinforcing mechanism of misperceiving—ways we distort reality to the detriment of belonging. Simply stated, we perceive something through our senses. There is a sense organ and a sense object—eyes see, ears hear, nose smells, body feels, tongue tastes, and mind thinks. Once we perceive, the mind habitually jumps to thoughts and feelings about what is being perceived; these thoughts and feelings are rooted in past experiences, past conditioning. Thoughts and feelings then influence the mood of our mind. When perceptions, thoughts, and feelings are repeated or imprinted through experiences, they solidify into view or belief. View then reinforces perception. This cycle becomes the way in which we experience and respond to the world.

We have racially conditioned perceptions that operate based on past experiences stored in the mind. These include memories, views, beliefs, and fears, all of which stimulate the mind to act or behave in ways that make sense to us. Once we perceive race, the mind immediately scans the memory bank of past experiences to interpret what is being perceived. We then add layers of meaning and the experience shifts from bare perceiving into something more textured and nuanced. When layered, perceptions become distorted, sticky, and weighty.

Essentially, we think we know something, and then we are off and running—all based on past experiences, preferences, and beliefs. And usually, but not always, it's all in our minds or, at a minimum, worthy of questioning. When we perceive and when thoughts and emotions are simultaneously activated, those thoughts and emotions proliferate, creating a state of fear and anxiety driven by what the mind is believing in that moment. In such moments, we are removed from presence; we vacate the premises of body and mind and are fixated on view. And the experience is real—until it's not. We're streaming the past live.

We feel more reassured when our views are mirrored back to us, even if we don't like our views. We are on guard when our views are challenged. Views that don't align with our own go unnoticed. We stop being mindful when we think we know, and that's when much harm can happen.

Years ago, my mom—who taught through stories and music—told me a noteworthy joke: On a one-lane zigzagging mountain road, two black guys driving down the hill pass two white police officers driving up the hill. They shout out to the cops, “Pigs, pigs!” The police officers, pissed by the perceived attack, keep driving. Seconds later, the police officer who is driving must slam on his brakes to avoid a herd of pigs crossing the road. This is the cycle of misperception at play.

Perception determines the characteristics of what it perceives—for example, whether a race is threatening or whether a race is worth paying attention to. It determines whether we like someone or something and whether we shoot someone or run. What we see in race is not inherently good or bad, right or wrong. It is our judgment about race—that is problematic. We place judgment on what we perceive; we add layers of meaning.

There is much we can do. We can make a practice of questioning our perceptions and critiquing any views and beliefs that surface in our mind that work against clear seeing, belonging, and healing. We can choose to reevaluate our racial perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs; try to recognize where they come from; and strip them of all those extra layers. Until we are willing to examine our views of racial conditioning, we're flipping off a caution and could kill some pigs or end up dressing a mannequin in a penguin costume.

Understanding the cycle of misperception supports us in distinguishing habits of harm. How perception, thoughts, and emotions reinforce views is an important mechanism to recognize and a useful way to begin questioning our perceptions and critiquing views and beliefs that work against racial literacy, harmony, and freedom.

Mindfulness can help us recognize the cycle of misperception and use our perceptions as invitations to look deeper to unknot the inner distress and racial habits of harm so that our response to outer racial suffering can be attended to more wisely.