

# Introduction to Mindfulness Pt. 2 (13) Bundle of Perceptions

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## Keyword Summary

attachments, *saññā*, biases, recognitions, assumptions, judgments, associations, memories, concepts, bell, not-knowing, projections, clinging, grasping, innocent, select, authority, lens, preconceived, interpretation, prejudice, racism, classism, ableism, diminishes

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Hello, and welcome to the third talk on the bundles of clinging.

The Buddha put a tremendous emphasis on being free from grasping, clinging, and attachment. We don't want to be in a hurry to be free of clinging or do it automatically and quickly. We want to understand well what it is that we are attached to and how we are attached. We want to become a student of grasping or clinging. We want to take the time to know it well. When we know it well, we will see its tricks in the future. We will see how it operates. We will see it coming and can leave it alone.

If we haven't really understood grasping and clinging, all kinds of attachments will creep up on us and catch us by surprise. Then we will have to do the much more difficult work of learning how to let go so they don't interfere with the full freedom of our lives.

The Buddha talks about five primary areas for attachment or clinging. Because we have multiple attachments to these areas and we keep these attachments close to us, the Buddha calls these attachments "bundles." We bundle them up together. There are five different bundles.

On Monday I talked about physical appearances – what we perceive through our senses – and our attachment to that. Yesterday, we discussed feelings or *vedana*, pleasant and unpleasant. Today we are discussing recognition or perception. In Pali, this is called *saññā*.

This is the simple acts of perception that involve a re-cognizing, a recognition, a re-cognition of what we're seeing. What we see is not the raw, basic sense data coming in. What we see is based on memories, concepts, and ideas. It is a process of selection – we select what we want to focus on. We have preconceived ideas about what we're seeing.

Some of the selecting is very innocent. We do it in a sub-vocal, almost subconscious way throughout the day. If we are having soup for our meal, we don't pick up the fork, we pick up a soup spoon. We recognize the difference between them. We know that one is different than the other. It is automatic to do that. Because it is automatic, we can do so much more in our lives than we could if we had to consider what everything was at the time we were going to deal with it.

However, because perception is automatic – we recognize or perceive things subconsciously – we don't see that recognition is a factor of the mind that we are contributing to. We can sometimes see clearly that the mind contributes to recognition when we see things that can be perceived as different things in different contexts.

For instance, here at IMC, we have this bell and we recognize it as a bell. One day in downtown San Francisco I saw a homeless person using a very similar Japanese temple bell about this size as a begging bowl. For him it wasn't a bell, it was a begging bowl. Someone else might find it useful as a place to store pens or as a soup bowl. In Asia, there are things that look like this bell that are used as spittoons. Someone could turn it upside down and use it as a doorstop. They see it as a doorstop. It could be many, many different things. The function of something is in how we see it.

However, this is not just about the different functions. Our acts of re-cognition often come along with associations, judgments, assumptions, and biases. We don't just see the person in their wholeness. We select and recognize them by some feature of what they are.

For example, when a person is coming down the sidewalk, the person is not just a person for us, we recognize them as being tall or short. The recognition of tall and short comes with associations about what it means to us. Maybe if we are short, it's like, "Oh, one of my people. I'm so glad because it's so awkward with all these tall people around." If it's a tall person and they are really tall – maybe six foot eight or something – the recognition can come with a sense of intimidation, "Oh, this feels a little bit dangerous for me."

The perception can feel familiar and comforting or there can be discomfort. We have biases around people. If someone looks like an enemy to us, we treat them and see them in a certain way, and the perception is not innocent. We are perceiving them now as an enemy. When we see someone as a potential friend (though they may or may not be a friend), we are adding something more than just the raw data of seeing them. We are seeing them through a lens of interpretation.

We add ideas on top of the raw basic data. There can be a lot of attachment to those ideas. There can be clinging to them. There can be a forcefulness or certainty to them. These ideas or attachments come along with all kinds of things. If they involve fear, it is a certainty of fear. There is a force of fear that is operating and contributing to the attachment. If it is desire or hatred, all these things come along. The perceptions are not innocent. There is attachment and clinging. A tremendous amount of suffering in this world has to do with how human beings perceive each other.

When we perceive people through a particular lens such as with bias, prejudice, racism, classism, or ableism, that lens limits and diminishes them. That makes it problematic. We don't see the wholeness of the person. We don't see them or give them the freedom to be who they are with respect, care, and love.

The same thing applies to ourselves. There can be a negative bias towards oneself. We see ourselves through that lens – we are a lousy person, we are an inadequate, unsuccessful, or unwanted person. That is a judgment that becomes a perception. This is what we see. There can be a lot of attachment, clinging, forcefulness, or compulsivity in our negative self-perceptions. They have a force of their own that is in us, driving us along. The negative judgments seem authoritative and full.

One of the primary teachings in Buddhism is to be very careful about perceptions. Perceptions are not innocent. Perceptions are not innocently out there. We have a contributing factor in constructing our perceptions and recognitions. We contribute to and construct the simple understanding of what something is.

We select something out of the whole. We are partial. We see things for a certain purpose, and for how they relate to us. This is one of the bundles of clinging. We can feel the forcefulness behind the ideas we have. We can feel the weight, the clinging. We can feel that the attachment comes with a sense of authority. It feels like this is the way it is. There is a sense that it has to be this way and a sense of pushing forward into the world. There is a lot of suffering because of this.

Practice not knowing. Practice with a healthy kind of doubt: maybe it's not this way. This person coming down the street may look like our enemy, and then again, maybe not –let's just see. Let's step off a little to the side of the walk to make sure we are safe. Let's look more clearly, and make sure that we are not just projecting fear onto this person. Sure enough, as the person gets closer, we can see the person actually looks very friendly and gentle. So we smile, and the person smiles and says hello. We feel so glad that we took the time to doubt our initial perception. It's not always that way.

So today, if you like, you might spend the day taking time to question your perceptions. When you perceive someone or something, ask yourself, through what lens are you seeing it? Is it the lens of what it can do for you? Is it the lens of its function, its relationship to you, or what you need to do? Is it the lens of your history, or your past experiences? Do you limit whatever you are seeing by perceiving only part of the whole? Is it limited by a judgment, interpretation, or an association you have? Take some time to question your perceptions.

This is a fun thing to do with another person. Perhaps sit on a park bench, or someplace in public. Do the exercise by explaining to the other person what your first perceptions are of something, or someone, or something going by. Then the two of you question those perceptions. Is that all there is? Is there more? Is that

limiting? Try to get a handle on how much perceptions are projections. Maybe in understanding this, you'll understand how valuable it is, from time to time, to practice not knowing. Not knowing is most intimate.

So, thank you.