

Pascal Auclair

*Moving beyond the Mirage: Practicing with Buddhism's Five Aggregates*

Week Three: "The Third Aggregate: Perception"

December 18, 2017



Hi. Bonjour. I'm Pascal Auclair. We're in our third week of exploring the five aggregates. This week we're going to focus on the aggregate of perception.

What is that? What is that exactly? What is that aspect of our experience? As you are listening [to this talk right now] there are all these rivers, all these five aggregates flowing through. There's the sound that's hitting your ears, the particular vibrations. That's the first aggregate of forms. There's something physical happening, the vibration of the "ear door." Then there's the feeling tone. We talked about this last week. Maybe what you're hearing is pleasant to hear. Maybe it's unpleasant, or maybe it's neither pleasant nor [unpleasant]. This is there in the background. It will come clearly at some point. If you hear something you don't like, you'll feel it. If you hear something you like a lot, you'll feel it. That's a second river flowing through the experience as we are speaking.

The third aspect of our experience is perception. As you're hearing me, it's not just, "rah rah rah rah," or vibrations. It makes sense. There's recognition happening. You know you're looking at the screen. You know that this is Pascal speaking or that there's an accent. You recognize something there. There's an organization of the world that's happening as we're living and it's happening all the time. As you walk in the street you recognize buildings. You don't have to think it, you don't have to make it happen, it just flows. It's really amazing to actually tune into that level of reality, how the world is organized for us. If you were to, for example, just move your eyes about the room, you would see how the mind would organize reality very easily: lamp, mirror, tree, et cetera. That particular river is flowing all the time in our experience, and we're invited by the Buddha to actually tune into this and become aware of it as it is happening, to be curious about it, because there are things that can be noticed and are worth noticing.

This perception we take as truth. We don't question our perceptions. We just think, *This is it. That's a description, an exact description of reality.* There is a little, I would say, a little misunderstanding. [We have a mistaken] view here because our perceptions are not actually always describing reality exactly. The Buddha used the image of the mirage [to talk about

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perception]. It points to two things: the mistaken view that something that seems to exist doesn't exist, and the ephemeral nature of our perceptions.

I'll tell you a story. The first time I went to practice meditation was at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California. California is very important to the story. I get my room. They say, "You're in room 125." So I go to the room, I [enter], and I'm all excited. It's the first time I was in California. I look at my room. Beautiful room. There's a window and it's a window [over] the field that is behind [the center], and spring is flowing there. So I look outside the window just to see my view for the week, and what do I see but a kangaroo there in California! I'm really taken aback because I'm like, "Ah! A kangaroo! That doesn't work in my mind. Kangaroos are in Australia. Kangaroos aren't in California." Then I look again and it's actually a deer pooping. I don't know if you've noticed how a deer [looks] when it's pooping, but it looks like a kangaroo, or it can if your attention is superficial. Something about perception is revealed here.

That isn't your classic example. The classic example you'll hear is about a snake. You enter a darkish room in the forest somewhere and you see a snake on the ground. Then you take your iPhone, you put your lamp on, and you notice it's actually not a snake. It's a rope. There's a mistaken perception here. The Buddha used the image of the mirage to make us really pay attention to that aggregate, or to the way that the world is constructed for us. The kangaroo and the snake, they're kind of fun, I hope, to hear about.

There are also perceptions that are more afflictive for us, more troubling for us. We might have this perception that [we are] separate from the world. I perceive reality like this. When I look at reality, there's the environment that's outside, and I'm here inside, and I'm a little conscious of being in the universe. There's a kind of existing existential angst or anxiety that can arise because [I say to myself], "How am I going to survive? There's me on one side, the world on the other side, and [survival is] viable but it's not gonna be easy." That perception of being separate is not a perception that is easy to live with, and it actually might not be the reality. It might just be the mirage of perception. We take for reality what is not exactly reality. That's important [to note]

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about wise view and wise understanding of reality. The Buddha is inviting us to pay attention to our perception, to see it in action, to see how it's ephemeral and changing.

For example, the perception I have of myself [is always changing], the flash of how I seem to be. Sometimes I'm a good person. I appear like this. I'm a good person. Sometimes [I think] I'm the worst person, or sometimes I appear as a good teacher to myself, or sometimes as a bad teacher, or a good son, or a bad son. Sometimes I feel like I have a lot of value, what I have to say has a lot of value, and sometimes something happens, a little event, and suddenly I don't have value anymore. My perceptions of being too old or too young, or of time being long or short, [vary] a lot with my mind states.

Let's take an example of perception around the future. How [the future is] perceived, depending on my mood, can be very different. If I'm in self-loathing despair, discouragement, maybe the future doesn't look so bright. If suddenly there's some space in the heart, mind, if there's some hope, some confidence, the future appears differently. [Suddenly you'll think,] *We're going to be able to solve that problem. We'll find a way out.* By seeing the variations in your perceptions, [you will notice] some things appear as others. [Someone] might seem like a friend and in a flash of lightning, in one thought, in one moment, suddenly [they are] the enemy.

You meet somebody and [think,] *Oh, I know that type of person.* That's bias. How does bias work? I have a preconceived idea and I think it's reality. I think, *This kind of person is like that.* Then I get to meet the person and I exchange a little bit and I'm like, *Oh, they're not like that at all. They're much more like this.* Or, *I thought they were like this and they were.* The perception is mirage-like, ephemeral, maybe describing reality, maybe not.

In [meditation] practice we use that aspect of perception to refine it. We really pay attention to clarify the perceptions, to make them closer to reality.

One kind of false perception that we often have is things are solid and permanent. The more we look closely and pay attention, [the more] we'll discover that permanent solids are unstable. When a loved one dies, for example, we get really distraught and confused because we thought

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they were permanent. We perceived them as having a full, essential beingness. We don't know that they're actually kind of a weather pattern. We can present [them as] something that came to be. The conditions were right, and one day [they will] go. My relationships are not permanently what they are. They're more fluctuating than this, and the perception of permanence is challenged by meditation. The perception of solidity has challenged my perception. So have the perceptions of desirability and satisfaction.

Have you sometimes seen something, an object, that you want to acquire because it's perceived as being satisfying? You think, *This is really going to satisfy me, this situation, this thing, this person*. Then you get closer to the experience and actually get to know it, and suddenly it's not that satisfying. I wanted this thing and I wanted that kind of car or TV. It could be anything. I'm just taking this as an example. Then I get it and suddenly it's not that satisfying.

I remember on my street one time, I had a neighbor who got a certain car and they were like, "My car. My new car." While we were talking about his car some kids went by with their bikes. They were a little wobbly on their bikes and they almost scratched his car. I could see suddenly that it was not solid, that the satisfying nature of the experience was very shaky, very unreliable. The car could actually be scratched in any moment or taken by somebody, so maybe his car was going to be a source of fear of losing more than a source of satisfaction. I don't know. You're invited to check it out in your experience. Have you perceived satisfaction where it was not like this?

It's not an experience of mine, but many of my friends have had babies, kids, children. I think they might have projected, some of them at least, satisfaction. Now that they have a kid it's a beautiful, profound experience. Yet it's not absolutely satisfying because that kid might get sick, or something might happen to this child that we love so much, or they might not act as we want them to act. That's a frustrating experience. Secretly, a friend of mine not too long ago told me, "In my next life I think I'm not gonna have kids. I'm gonna take a break." To me, that [revealed] the not absolutely satisfying nature of something that from far away was perceived as satisfying.

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In this reality as it's presented in Buddhist thought, events, phenomena, experiences, the senses, pleasure, displeasure, and perceptions are all pretty unstable and can actually provide satisfaction. What is this [saying]? It's saying, to me, that to live in reality I'll need to have a lot of equilibrium, a mind that is very balanced, that is steady, courageous, and able to be touched by beauty and pleasure, but also able to let it go. [I'll need a] mind and heart that are able to meet the challenges, the unpleasantness, because there will be some, and maybe the relationship to these things is gonna be much more important than having what I want, which is probably not exactly gonna happen in my life.

This perceptions of "I," "me," "mine," and the system of the aggregates, we really want to question. There might be four different ways that you perceive things as being you, like identification, ownership, mistaken ownership, [et cetera]. See if it's true for you. Whatever part of what you experience, see if you see it as [one of these views.] "There are only four views," the Buddha said. Something either appears or is perceived as being "I." I am this body. I am these thoughts or this emotion or this consciousness, this observer here. I am this. Or it's "mine." If something is not "I," it might appear to be "mine." "I" or "mine." It's my thoughts. I know the thoughts but they're mine. If it's not this, it might feel like something I'm inside. I'm not the body, but I'm inside of it. I'm inside. Or it's inside of me. The emotions are inside of me. The thoughts are inside of me. Buddha said, "These are four ways that we are mistakenly perceiving reality."

For example, I might think that my bicycle outside is mine. I might think this is absolutely true. This is my bicycle. When I go out later somebody might have taken it. So in a way, in a conventional sense, it's mine. We agree. As long as we agree that it's mine, it's mine. But ultimately, absolutely, is it really my bicycle? I think it's worth clearing up that perception and knowing that there's something a little bit more fluid here. Yes, it's mine, but it's not possible to own something. My thoughts [are the same way]. They might appear to be mine, but in meditation if I slow down and pay attention, I see that many of the thoughts land there uninvited. They actually come because they follow a certain sound, or because of my culture, or because of the time of day. Suddenly that kind of thought rises. It's very circumstantial. Maybe it's perceived

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as being me, or mine, or I'm in it, or it's in me, but on a closer look meditation insight can actually release that false ownership.

You're invited this week to become aware of your perception, especially when there's a mistaken perception and you find out. [For example,] you thought you were late and then find out you were not. It really seemed like it was reality. It felt like this so much until you discovered it is not. I hope you play with this a little bit. Thank you.