

Chapter 14

Perception

Discussion points

- How perception influences our judgement
- Basis of perception
- Impossibility of knowing the 'Reality' as it is.
- Is there any correct perception?

You are on a morning walk in the neighbourhood park. You see so many different forms and colours and recognize some of them, a tree, a dog, a neem tree, a woman, a man, your friend Ramesh, and so on. That faculty of the mind by which you recognize various sense objects, i.e. forms, tastes, sounds, smells, touch and name these as the rose flower, sweet taste, sound of a siren, musk fragrance, rough surface, etc. is termed as perception. For very good reasons, the Buddha identifies 'mind' also as one of the senses and so the perception includes our 'recognition' of thoughts as good or bad, our value judgements etc.

Our perception influences the way we interpret the world and relate to it. Let us take a common example. One has a perception of the 'decent' dress of a girl and anybody not conforming to that perception is termed by him as 'indecently dressed'. Whenever he sees such 'indecently dressed' girl this perception leads to a chain of thoughts about the likely family background of that girl, her character and her other habits. A worse situation would be if he takes up the role of 'moral police' and rebukes the girl for her 'indecent dress' or even goes a step further and in his self-righteousness decides to 'teach her a lesson'. While doing all this, the person is quite convinced about the correctness of his action, since he believes that his perception is right. In fact we all implicitly believe in the correctness of our various perceptions and get attached to them as 'my perception'... and this is one of the most common reasons of conflicts in the society.

A young man and woman are in love and after a long courtship are convinced 'we are 'made for each other' and marry; and lo behold, within a few months they are not on talking terms with each other. What happened? The husband feels his wife doesn't behave well with him. Why? Her behavior doesn't conform to his perception of what a good wife should do. The wife also feels

the same about her husband, for his behavior is quite different from her expectations. How did these perceptions form? Most likely by seeing their parents attitude towards each other , and strengthened, probably, by the kind of society they lived in and even by type of 'films' that they saw. As lovers they never had an opportunity to explore these 'minor' issues which become so important after marriage. Even differences in eating and sleeping habits, differences in the type of music they like, in the type of films they like to see, in the kind of fruit and vegetable they like can become a source of pervasive tension between family members. The situation often gets compounded when both are tenaciously attached to their perception: 'This is Right, this is how it should be'. 'After all why can't husband prepare the morning tea, which code of conduct says that it is only the duty of wife?' 'Why can't the husband clean the dishes?' 'It is the duty of the wife to look after the home, and that of the husband to work and earn. Who would take care of the home if both are working?'

The Buddha points out that like all other body-mind phenomena , the perception is also conditioned, dependent upon the upbringing, the family and societal values, the education and even the climate of the area where one lives. And it is constantly changing in the light of new experiences and new knowledge. What was considered as 'healthy food' in sixties is no longer classified as 'heathy' today even in the same country; and surely there can be stark societal differences too. Even the WHO's perception of 'healthy blood pressure or healthy cholesterol levels' has undergone significant change over last few decades. What is considered as 'indecent' dress in India may be quite normal in USA. The manner of addressing elders/ teachers/ the boss in the east is quite different from that in the west. It doesn't make either of them better than the other.

Inability to see this truth is a major cause of interpersonal conflicts – between the members of a family, the communities, the religions, the nations. Accepting the tentative nature of one's perception and being open to the possibility of another perspective on the same issue liberates one from the shackles of self-righteousness.

Even modern science recognizes the fact that it is impossible to know the 'Reality' as it really is⁷⁴ , for we can only get an inference about it based on the nature of the equipment used for investigation. Thus considering first our normal sensory apparatus, we infer about the nature of the world on the basis of what we see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. Now all these senses have their limitations and so we perceive only that which is revealed through that small window. For example, human eye can see within the wavelengths of 390 to 700nm and we believe that the colours we see are the 'real' colours of various objects. This is just a consensual

⁷⁴ Immanuel Kant : Although our senses tell us that things exist outside of ourselves, the actual real substance of an object (what he called the "ding-an-sich" or thing-in-itself") was essentially unknowable.

reality, for most humans have eyes with similar abilities. Colour blind people on the other hand cannot see all the colours and so that community has a different consensual reality. Many animals and birds can however sense wavelengths beyond the human visible spectrum because of different constitution of their eyes. Their eyes have four types of photoreceptors as against three found in most humans. Thus they can 'see' in the ultraviolet region too and so the world as seen by them is likely to be very different (see for example the pictures given in this blog⁷⁵) with a predominance of violet colour. Dogs on the other hand have only two types of photoreceptors and so their vision is akin to that of a colour-blind person. Clearly we can never say what the 'real' colour of an object is. The same is true of the sounds we hear⁷⁶. The humans can hear in the frequency range 20Hz to 20 KHz, but pets like dogs can hear up to 46 KHz. Bats, as we all know, can hear up to a phenomenal 120 KHz and some varieties of fish do even better. Porpoise can hear up to 150 KHz frequencies⁷⁶. Clearly the sound emanating from any source will be heard differently by different species and we can never specify, 'this' is the real sound! The same is true of other senses. For example, the extreme sensitivity of a dog to smells is well known. Surely no perception is more real than the others.

The picture becomes even more dramatic at the level of the fundamental particles, the ultimate building blocks of matter. Thus a beam of photons would show a particle behavior if our experimental set up is designed to reveal that, and would behave like a wave if our experiential set up is designed accordingly⁷⁷. Niels Bohr describes this beautifully in his famous complementarity principle:

Consequently, evidence obtained under different experimental conditions cannot be comprehended within a single picture, but must be regarded as complementary in the sense that only the totality of the phenomena exhausts the possible information about the objects.

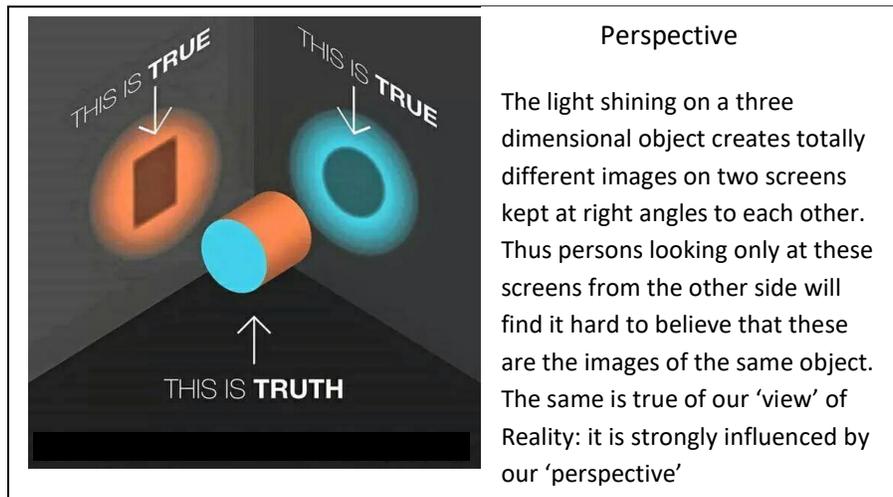
The classical image of five blind men trying to 'understand' what an elephant is, by touching various parts of his body, seems to be actually true of our attempts to understand Reality. We, like one of those blind men, can capture only a part of the Reality. Apparently contradictory perceptions are actually complementary, each revealing only one 'perspective' of the whole. (See Box).

⁷⁵ <http://morgana249.blogspot.in/2014/07/10-examples-of-how-animals-see-images.html>

⁷⁶ <http://www.myihp.co.uk/animal-hearing-ranges/>

⁷⁷ See for example these interesting videos : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAVPRDnzSpE>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3ABix1LJA>

One can thus appreciate the Buddha's statement⁷⁸ : *The perception is like a mirage.*



While our usual perceptions are subjective, there are certain perceptions which are based on the fundamental nature of all the experiences, as discussed in [Chapter 11](#), namely their impermanence, un-satisfactoriness and insubstantiality. These could thus be termed as the 'right perceptions'. In an oft-quoted discourse the Buddha points out how by adopting these right perceptions⁷⁹ we can liberate ourselves from all unhappiness. Thus imbibing the perception of impermanence of all our experiences would reduce the tendency to hold on to pleasures, and run away from unpleasant experiences. The perception of inherent unsatisfactory nature of all that is impermanent, engenders disenchantment from worldly temptations and we lead a peaceful life free from agitations caused by success and failure, gain and loss. The perception of impersonality reduces pride, attachment to 'self', and makes us humble.

Another such fundamental truth is that of intrinsically non-beautiful nature of all forms, discussed in [Chapters 10](#) and [26](#). This perception reduces greed and lust. Thus these 'correct perceptions' would help us to reduce the existential unhappiness of the human realm.

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⁷⁸ SN 22.95 : Phena Sutta

⁷⁹ AN 10.26 ; Girimānanda Sutta