

The Distortions of the Mind

Aṅguttara Nikāya 4:49

These verses from the Numerical Discourses give the traditional list of the *vipallāsas*. 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 (*saññā-vipallāsa*) 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-vipallāsa*) 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-vipallāsa*). 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.

cattāro ‘me bhikkhave
saññā-vipallāsā
citta-vipallāsā
ditthi-vipallāsā:...

anicce niccasaññīno
dukkhe ca sukhasaññīno
anattani ca attā ti
asubhe subhasaññīno

micchādītthigatā sattā
khittacittā visaññīno

te yogayuttā Mārassa
ayogakkhemino janā
sattā gacchanti samsāraṃ
jātimaraṇagāmino

yadā ca buddhā lokasmiṃ
uppajjanti pabhaṅkarā
te imaṃ dhammaṃ pakāsentī
dukkhūpasamagāmināṃ

tesaṃ sutvāna sappaññā
sacittaṃ paccalatthu te

aniccaṃ aniccato dakkhū
dukkhaṃ addakkhu dukkhato
anattani anattā ti
asubhaṃ asubhaṃ addasū

sammādītthisamādānā
sabbadukkhā upaccagun ti

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 (*anattā*) 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 *vipallāsas*.

These four, O Monks, are distortions of perception, distortions of thought distortions of view:...

Sensing no change in the changing,
Sensing pleasure in suffering,
Assuming “self” where there’s no self,
Sensing the un-lovely as lovely—

Gone astray with wrong views, beings
Mis-perceive with distorted minds.

Bound in the bondage of Mara,
Those people are far from safety.
They’re beings that go on flowing:
Going again from death to birth.

But when in the world of darkness
Buddhas arise to make things bright,
They present this profound teaching
Which brings suffering to an end.

When those with wisdom have heard this,
They recuperate their right mind:

They see change in what is changing,
Suffering where there’s suffering,
“Non-self” in what is without self,
They see the un-lovely as such.

By this acceptance of right view,
They overcome all suffering.

I like the way these verses say that when under the influence of these distortions we have “lost our senses” (*vi-saññīno*) 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.

—A. Olendzki