



## The Buddha and the Coronavirus

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### Part 1

The coronavirus situation is very challenging. We worry which is defined as giving way to anxiety or unease. We go into a trance with is allowing one's mind to dwell on difficulty or troubles. In other words, we catch the disease of dis-ease. Thoughts arise that cause us to worry. the virus, the economy, our livelihood, our friends, our self and so on. How can we personally deal with it? What can the teachings tell us?

There are two teachings (suttas) that are relevant to our situation: The Principles of Suffering Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta<sup>1</sup> and the Meditation on Perception Girmānanda Sutta<sup>2</sup>

### The dis-ease

The Buddha said in the Alagaddupama Sutta<sup>3</sup>: *“What I teach now as before, O monks, is suffering and the cessation of suffering.”* His approach was similar that of a medical physician dealing with physical illnesses. Suffering is a disease (dis ease) has symptoms, a cause, a cure and a prescription for its cessation. In the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the Buddha outlined these principles as the Four Noble Truths or what I call the Principles of Suffering. When we view suffering as a disease, it is easier to address because we realize that suffering affects everyone and can more easily abandon our judgment about our suffering.

The Principles of the Suffering can be summarized as noted below:

Principles of Suffering	Explanation
Symptoms	Dissatisfaction, stress, fear, tension, anxiety, worry, depression, disappointment, anger, jealousy, abandonment, nervousness, mental pain, etc..
Cause	Wanting life to be other than it is, attachment to an outcome
Cure	Stop craving, let go
Prescription	The Eightfold Path

Looking more closely at the dis-ease (dissatisfaction) that we experience from thoughts arising about the coronavirus, there are two beliefs in our mind to which we may be attached:

### Attachment to No Change or Stability

Our mind believes in stability and doesn't like change. It sees that the current coronavirus situation as change with an uncertain future. Our tendency is to crave for stability; wanting life to return to what it

was before the virus. This is not going to happen. Change is a part of life and when we find ourselves attached to stability, we are in delusion.

### **Attachment to Control**

The mind wants control over everything and, as with instability, it doesn't like not being in control. Rather than accepting that we are not in control, we abide in resentment rather than equanimity. This doesn't mean that there is nothing that we can do. It just means that our actions are what we can do and that we do not rely on control.

### **The problem is with our perception.**

These two sources of suffering, change and no control, occur because we lack what Bhante Gunaratana terms realistic perception. Our perception is distorted because we pay more attention to what our mind is telling us than what is really going on.

### **What is perception?**

Perception is defined as the state of being or process of becoming aware of something through the senses, and/or a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; **a mental impression.**

### **The role of the mind in our perception.**

Lisa Barrett Feldman, a scientist at Northeastern University and Harvard University explains that in order for the mind to make sense out of an experience, it has to draw upon memories and beliefs to compare. *"To understand why this is the case, let's take your brain's perspective for a moment. Like those ancient, mummified Egyptian pharaohs, the brain spends eternity entombed in a dark, silent box. It cannot get out and enjoy the world's marvels directly; it learns what is going on in the world only indirectly via scraps of information from the light, vibrations, and chemicals that become sights, sounds, smells, and so on. Your brain must figure out the meaning of those flashes and vibrations, and its main clues are your past experiences, which it constructs as simulations within its vast network of neural connections. Your brain has learned that a single sensory cue, such as a loud bang, can have many different causes— a door being slammed, a bursting balloon, a hand clap, a gunshot. It distinguishes which of these different causes is most relevant only by their probability in different contexts. It asks, Which combination of my past experiences provides the closest match to this sound, given this particular situation with its accompanying sights, smells, and other sensations? And so, trapped within the skull, with only past experiences as a guide, your brain makes predictions."*<sup>4</sup>

This prediction is what we call perception, the mental impression that the mind has created to recognize what we have experienced through the senses. However, depending on the information that the mind has drawn from memory, the perception is more detailed than just a mere identification. Take for example, the perception of the loud bang that Dr. Barrett mentioned. If we have a memory of a balloon bursting that we found annoying, the mind might create the perception of what just happened as an annoying balloon bursting. From this perception, an unpleasant mental formation arises of annoyance. Thus, from merely experiencing a loud noise and an image of a balloon, we become annoyed. If on the other hand, we had the same experience with no stored memory of an annoyance of a balloon bursting, we might be intrigued at the balloon bursting and not annoyed. In other words, in the process of identifying the experience, the mind adds judgement, commentary and recommendations (decisions).

Similarly, the thoughts associated with the coronavirus are influenced by our memories and beliefs. When the outbreak of polio occurred in the 1950's, I was a young kid and didn't think much about the danger and morbidity of the disease. My father was physician who was asked to be on TV to demonstrate the iron lung. When I went with him to the TV station, they needed someone to be in the iron lung and picked me. So, my memory of polio was a fun experience and at that time, I had no memories of all of the deaths caused by this disease. Now, with the pandemic of the coronavirus and the access to all of the statistics, my mind is prone to making dire predictions based on my stored memories and beliefs.

So when we suffer from our thoughts about the coronavirus, we need to check our perception. Is what the mind telling us really true or do we need to investigate? **When we suffer, it is because the perception or mental impression created from our memories and held beliefs cause unpleasant mental formations to arise that can then lead to a reaction and suffering.**

#### **How can we tell if our perceptions are deluded?**

The first step is to always question our perceptions when we experience suffering. We do so with mindfulness, investigation, and persistence. Bhante Gunaratana (Bhante G.) has written a wonderful book called *Meditation on Perception: Ten Healing Practices to Cultivate Mindfulness*<sup>5</sup> that addresses each of these deluded perceptions that the Buddha taught in the Girimananda Sutta as mentioned above.

The Girimananda sutta concerns the Venerable Girimananda, a monk in the Buddha's time who became "sick, afflicted, and gravely ill." The Buddha's manservant, Ananda, informed the Buddha about this and asked if the Buddha would "visit him out of compassion." Instead of visiting, the Buddha asked if Ananda would speak to him about ten perceptions. The Buddha then gave Ananda the discourse on the ten perceptions and afterwards said, "*If Ananda, you visit the bhikkhu Girimananda and speak to him about these ten perceptions, it is possible that on hearing about them he will immediately recover from his affliction.*"

*"Then, when the Venerable Ananda had learned these ten perceptions from the Blessed One, he went to the Venerable Girimananda and spoke to him about them. When the Venerable Girimananda heard about these ten perceptions, his affliction immediately subsided. The Venerable Girimananda recovered from that affliction, and that is how he was cured of his affliction."*

Bhikkhu Bodhi in his forward to *Meditation on Perception* notes that in order to cease our suffering, we transform our cognition (way of thinking). This cognitive breakthrough involves changing our perception so that we see things as they really are rather than craving to have life be other than it is. We change our distorted perception to a purified perception. He notes that *the most debilitating illness of all, (is) the ignorance inherent in mental distortions and in toxic views about ourselves and the world in which we live.*"

#### **How does this relate to our suffering from thoughts arising about the coronavirus?**

When we experience thoughts about the virus and its spread, we may experience an unpleasant sensation from the body and a deluded perception from the mind. The unpleasant bodily sensations alert us to the potential of dis-ease and we can take action by though mindfulness, recognizing our

perception and investigating it. We ask, is the perception really true? Is there other information that would be helpful? Or is this just a case of not knowing?

Also we meditate, practicing mindfulness of the breath to calm the mind, insight practice to gain clarity and metta (loving-kindness) to maintain that connection with our self and others.

In the next part, we will go into more detail about the 10 deluded perceptions and how they might relate to the coronavirus situation.

## **Part II**

The Buddha defined pure perception as what the senses sense without embellishment. Perception is pure and clean in its original state. It can become distorted by what Bhante Gunaratana calls “the virus of concepts.”

Let’s consider an example. Suppose we see someone’s nose. Concepts stored previously in the mind arise to our consciousness and make us believe that the nose is beautiful or ugly. Next we see the person’s lips. Again, our previously stored information makes us believe that the lips are beautiful or ugly. Similarly, we see the person’s eyes, eyebrows, teeth, head hair, body hair, and skin. Our mind has stored many concepts concerning each of these visual objects. All this information fuels our positive or negative judgment of the person’s features. When we add all of these conceptual judgments together, we believe that we are seeing a beautiful face or an ugly face. Similarly, we add numerous concepts with regard to hands, legs, fingers, nails, and every other part of the person’s body. As a result, we decide that we have seen a beautiful or an ugly person.

But in reality, all that we have perceived are eyes, nose, teeth, skin, hair, hands, legs, and face in the conventional sense. These body parts are in themselves neither beautiful nor ugly; nor is the person as a whole beautiful or ugly. What has happened is that concepts, ideas, opinions, beliefs, and many other categories of conditioning have influenced our perception. In essence, our perception has become distorted. Only if we can transcend these distortions can we perceive the simple truth of what appears to the senses.<sup>6</sup>

Like our viewing of someone’s face, the concepts, ideas, opinions, beliefs, and many other categories of conditioning about the coronavirus have influenced our perception of the pandemic. This impedes our current understanding of the pandemic as we already accepted the judgment of our mind. When we are mindful about the pandemic, we experience without judgement.

**In summary, the process that causes distorted perception leads to unhappiness (suffering) because we became attached to the concept rather than seeing what is.**

Another way to understand the process of distorted perception is to know that it reflects the opposite of the true characteristics of all experience (impermanence, dissatisfaction, selfless nature). Perception is always changing (impermanence), unreliable (dissatisfaction) and not our self (selfless nature).

Distorted perception causes us to perceive objects as permanent, reliable (satisfactory) and under our control (self).

Regarding perception, there is a tendency to regard our perception as self or that we possess perception. For example, if we perceive something as beautiful, we believe that this is the truth that is a part of our “self.” In truth, self is only a concept and always stands in relationship to an object. It cannot exist outside of an object.

Perception is impermanent. If it were permanent, our perception would not change over time. Something that we regarded as beautiful would always be that way.

As Bhante G. notes in *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*: “Thus the more you focus on mind itself, the less solid it seems. Like everything else that exists, it is always changing. Moreover, you discover, there is no permanent entity; no one is running the movie projector. All is flux, all is flow, all is process. In reality, who you are is simply this constant flow of changing moments of mind. Since you cannot control this process, you have no choice but to let go. In letting go, you experience joy and you taste for an instant the freedom and happiness that is the goal of the Buddha’s path. Then you know that this mind can be used to gain wisdom.”<sup>7</sup>

### The Ten Deluded Perceptions

The ten deluded perceptions that the Buddha taught Ananda in the *Girimananda Sutta* are conceptual frameworks that arise as we noted from the concepts, ideas, opinions, beliefs, and many other categories of conditioning stored in our memory. Each one of these is worth investigating to see if we hold the deluded perception as a belief.

Below is a diagram showing the 10 deluded perceptions and the purified perception for each:

	<b>Deluded Perception</b>	<b>Pure Perception</b>
1	There is permanence.	Perception of Impermanence
2	There is a “self.”	Perception of Selflessness
3	The body is pure (attractive).	Perception of Impurities
4	Afflictions of the body are remote possibilities.	Perception of Danger
5	Thoughts of pleasure and ill-will are harmless and the way life is.	Perception of Abandoning
6	Craving is the way to pleasure.	Perception of Dispassion
7	Suffering is inevitable.	Perception of Cessation
8	The world is delightful.	Perception of Nondelight in the Whole World
9	We are our thoughts and we cling to them.	Perception of Impermanence in Regard to All Mental Formations.
10	We cannot change our perceptions.	Perception of Mindfulness of Breathing

Below are listed the ten deluded perceptions with the pure perception in parentheses)

**There is permanence (Perception of Impermanence)**

Anytime that we perceive permanence, we have to ask ourselves, ‘Is this permanence really true?’

**There is a “self” (Perception of Selflessness)**

We exist; however, the “self” is just a concept. It is not needed for us to exist. Recall what Bhante G. said: “All is flux, all is flow, all is process. In reality, who you are is simply this constant flow of changing moments of mind.”

**The body is pure (Perception of Impurities)**

What is pure? This is a concept; we are who we are and always changing.

**Afflictions of the body are remote possibilities (Perception of Danger)**

As we have seen from the pandemic, this is not true. We can only take care of ourselves and others as best as we can.

**Thoughts of pleasure and ill-will are harmless (Perception of Abandoning)**

These unskillful thoughts are concepts and lead nowhere except to dissatisfaction. They must be abandoned.

**Craving is the way to pleasure (Perception of Dispassion)**

Do you have to want something to get pleasure from it? Just the opposite! Craving just leads to clinging which leads to suffering. When we sense craving, we must investigate our passion for what it is.

**Suffering is inevitable (Perception of Cessation)**

This is a concept of hopelessness. Suffering can cease by letting go of our attachments and following the Eightfold Path.

**The world is delightful (Perception of Nondelight in the Whole World)**

This is a judgement. The world is composed of all elements: gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and criticism, fame and disrepute. We must accept all of them.

**We are our thoughts and we cling to them (Perception of Impermanence in Regard to All Mental Formations)**

All thoughts are impermanent. We are clinging to nothing.

**We cannot change our perception (Perception of Mindfulness of Breathing)**

This is a concept of hopelessness. We can choose to be mindful and investigate. The seeing is the doing and transformation can take place.

Please reflect on each one of these distorted perceptions. Each one of these perceptions is explained more fully in the book as well on the [White Hall Meditation website](#))

Specific links are below:

- [Meditation on Perception: Introduction/Overview](#)
- [What is perception?](#)
- [Distorted Perception I](#)
- [Distorted Perception II](#)
- [Purified Perception](#)
- [Introduction to the Ten Healing Perceptions](#)
- [Perception of Impermanence Part I](#)
- [Perception of Impermanence Part II](#)
- [Perception of Selflessness Part I](#)
- [Perception of Selflessness Part II](#)
- [Perception of Impurities Part I](#)
- [Perception of Impurities Part II](#)
- [Know and Let Go](#)
- [Perception of Danger](#)
- [Perception of Abandoning](#)
- [Perception of Dispassion](#)
- [Perception of Cessation](#)
- [Perception of Nondelight in the Whole World](#)
- [Perception of Impermanence in Regard to All Mental Formations](#)
- [Mindfulness of Breathing I](#)
- [Mindfulness of Breathing II](#)
- [Mindfulness of Breathing III](#)
- [Meditation: Impermanence and the Six Sensory Objects and The Mind is Also Changing](#)
- [Meditation: Dependent Origination](#)
- [Freedom](#)

### **Another pandemic to be aware of**

BULLETIN

INNER PEACE SYNDROME

WORLD PANDEMIC

by Saskia Davis, R.N.<sup>8</sup>

First identified 28 years ago, the INNER PEACE SYNDROME is sweeping nations, worldwide. Insidious and highly contagious, it creeps silently through societies, infecting one heart at a time. Though no cure has been found, the following preventative measures have been identified: fear, worry, resentment anger, blame, guilt, self-pity, attachment to perceptions, people or things, dishonesty with self or others, negative judgements. Regular practice of any of the foregoing has been found to thwart the onset of the inner peace syndrome. Prevention can be furthered by abstaining from certain attitudes and behaviors.

Here are some symptoms of inner peace adapted from Saskia Davis.

A tendency to think and act spontaneously

An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment

A loss of interest in judging other people

A loss of interest in judging self

A loss of interest in conflict  
A loss of the ability to worry  
A lessening of reactivity  
Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation  
Contented feelings of connectedness with other and nature  
Frequent attacks of smiling  
An increasing tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen.  
An increased susceptibility to the love extended by others as well as the uncontrollable urge to extend it.

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<sup>1</sup> [Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Girimānanda Sutta](#) AN 10:60

<sup>3</sup> [Alagaddupama Sutta](#)

<sup>4</sup> Barrett, Lisa Feldman. *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*.

<sup>5</sup> Bhante Gunaratana *Meditation on Perception: Ten Healing Practices to Cultivate Mindfulness*

<sup>6</sup> Bhante Gunaratana *Meditation on Perception* p. 21-22

<sup>7</sup> Bhante Gunaratana *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness* p. 216

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.symptomsofinnerpeace.net/Home.html>