

# Understanding our Mind

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*Every Kind of Seed*

*In us are infinite varieties of seeds—  
Seeds of samsara, nirvana, delusion, and enlightenment,  
Seeds of suffering and happiness,  
Seeds of perceptions, names, and words.*

Our store consciousness also contains seeds generated from our perceptions. We perceive many things, and the objects of these perceptions are then stored in our store consciousness. When we perceive an object, in Buddhist terms, we see its "sign" (*lakshana*). The Sanskrit word "lak-shana" also means "mark," "designation," or "appearance." The sign of a thing is the image that is created by our perception (*samjna*) of it. Suppose we see a wooden platform supported by four legs—that image becomes a seed within our consciousness. The name we assign to this image, "table," is another seed in us. "Table" is the object of our perception. We, the perceiver, are the subject. The two are linked: every time we perceive the object we have named as a "table," or even simply hear the word "table," our image of a table manifests in our mind consciousness.

Buddhism identifies three pairs of signs of phenomena.

**The first pair is the universal and the particular sign of something.** When we look at a house, the sign, or image, "house" is initially universal. The universal sign "house" is like its generic label. A few years ago you could buy generic food in the supermarket. Instead of color images and brand names, the label on a can of corn, for example, displayed simply the word "corn" in black type on a plain white wrapping. The universal sign of an object is like that.

Using our discriminative mind, however, we soon perceive thousands of details about each house—the brick, wood, nails, and so on, that are specific to it. These specifics are the particular sign of a house. The house can be seen as a whole—its universal sign — or as a combination of its parts, its particular sign. Everything has both a universal and a particular nature.

**The second pair of signs is unity and diversity.** Our notion of house is an idea of unity. All houses are part of the designation "house." But the universal notion of "house" does not show us any individual house, which is unique in its particulars.

There are countless variations of houses, and that is the nature of diversity. When we look at any phenomena, we should be able to see unity in the diversity, and diversity in the unity.

**The third pair of signs is formation and disintegration.** A house may be in the process of being built, but at the same time it is also in the process of disintegrating. Even though the wood is new and the house is not yet completely built, already the moisture or dryness of the air is beginning to weather it. Looking at something that is beginning to take form, we should already be able to see that it is also in the process of disintegrating as well.

Meditation training is designed to help us learn to see both aspects of each pair of signs. We see the whole when we are looking at the parts, and each part when we are looking at the whole. When a carpenter looks at a tree, he can already envision a house, because he has been trained in constructing a house from the material of the tree. He is seeing both the universal and particular aspects of the tree. Through mindfulness we train ourselves to see all six signs—universal and particular, unity and diversity, formation and disintegration—whenever we perceive a single sign, a specific object. This is the teaching of interbeing.

We assign names and words, or "appellations," to the objects of our perception, such as "mountain," "river," "Buddha," "God," "father," "mother." Every name we've assigned to a phenomenon, every word we've learned, is stored as a seed within our consciousness. The seeds give rise to other seeds in us, called "images." When we hear the name of something, an image arises in our consciousness, and we then take that image to be reality. As soon as we hear someone say the words "New York," for example, we immediately touch the seeds of the image of New York we have in our store consciousness. We picture the Manhattan skyline or the faces of people we know there. These images may differ from the current reality of New York, however. They may be entirely creations of our imagination, but we cannot see the boundary between reality and our erroneous perceptions.

We use words to point to something—an object or a concept—but they may or may not correspond to the "truth" of that thing, which can only be known through a direct perception of its reality. In our daily life we rarely have a direct perception. We invent, imagine, and create perceptions based on the seeds of the images that we have in our store consciousness. When we fall in love, the image of our beloved that we hold in our minds may be quite different from the actual person. You might say that we end up marrying our false perception rather than the person herself.

Erroneous perceptions bring about much suffering. We feel certain that our perceptions are correct and complete, yet often they are not. I know a man who suspected that his son was not his own but was the child of a neighbor who had visited his wife often. The father was too proud and ashamed to tell his wife or anyone else about his suspicion. Then one day a visiting friend remarked how much the boy looked like his father. At that moment, the man realized that the boy was indeed his own son. Because he had held onto this wrong perception, the family endured much pain for many years. Not only these three people but everyone around them also suffered because of this wrong perception.

It is very easy to confuse our mental image, our sign of something, with its reality. The process of mistaking our perceptions for reality is so subtle that it is very difficult to know that it is going on, but we must try not to do this. The way to avoid this is mindfulness. We practice meditation to train the mind in direct perception, in correct perception. When we meditate, we look deeply into our perceptions in order to find out their nature and to discover the elements that are correct and the elements that are incorrect.

If you are not mindful, you will believe that your perceptions, which are based on prejudices that have developed from the seeds of past experiences in your store consciousness, are correct. When we have a wrong perception and continue to maintain it, we hurt ourselves and others. In I act, people kill one another over their different perceptions of the same reality.

We live in a universe filled with false images and delusions, yet we believe that we are truly in touch with the world. We may have a deep respect for the Buddha and believe that if we were to meet him in person, we would bow before him and attend all of his teachings. But, in reality, we may have already met the Buddha in our own town and not had the slightest wish to even go near him, because he didn't conform to our image of what a Buddha is supposed to look like. We are certain that a Buddha appears with a halo, wearing beautiful robes. So when we meet a Buddha in ordinary clothes, we do not recognize him or her. How could a Buddha wear a sport shirt? How could a Buddha be without a halo?

There are so many seeds of wrong perception in our consciousness. Yet we are quite sure that our perception of reality is correct. "That person hates me. He will not look at me. He wants to harm me." This may be nothing more than a creation of our mind. Believing that our perceptions are reality, we may then act out of that belief. This is very dangerous. A. wrong perception can create countless problems. In fact, all our suffering arises from our failure to recognize things as they are. We should always ask ourselves, humbly, "Am I sure?" and then allow space and time for our perceptions to grow deeper, clearer, and more stable. In medical practice these days, physicians and caregivers are reminded by each other to not be too sure of anything. "Even if you think you are certain, check it again," they urge each other.

Lexique:

*Sarvabijaka*: store consciousness, the totality of the seeds.

*Adana* : to maintain, to hold, not to lose. Maintaining all the seeds—keeping them alive so that they are available to manifest

*Bijas*: Seeds

*Samsara*: cycle of suffering

*Lak-shana*: "mark," "designation," or "appearance.

*Samjna*: perception