

Accept yourself, reject your self¹

1 SELF-MADE RUT. In many ways, we are what we think. We are the totality of our sense-experiences (what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think, especially the last). This is what we *really* are, but we do not often realize it. We almost always collect or remember only those sense-experiences that we like (defined as what we recognize as a past pleasurable experience) and ignore those we dislike (what we recall as an unpleasant past), and with these tidbits we build our world: we are a very limited edition of a living book, in that

we only see	what we want to see,
we only hear	what we want to hear,
we only sense (smell, taste, touch)	what we want to sense, and
we only know	what we want to know.

In other words, we superimpose our own memories, hopes, views and biases onto our sense-experiences, hiding the true reality of things. Like the proverbial ostrich, we often simply leave our heads buried in the sands of a mishmash of distorted and perverted sense-experiences. Then we begin to wonder why we are suffocating.

2 THE THREE LEVELS OF PERVERSION. The Buddha says that we often fall into **3 levels of perversion** (“distorted or twisted ways of looking at things”), that is,

- (1) distorted perception: how we “see” ourself, others, and things;
- (2) distorted thoughts: the kinds of things we like to think about;
- (3) distorted views: the ideas that we hold dear, even inviolable.

What we see as “self,” “soul,” some “essence” or anything abiding has to do with how we perceive things, how we think, and how we view ourselves.

The perversion of perception (how we “see” ourself, others and things) is the most fundamental (that is, the problem *begins* there). The perversion of thought (the things we like to think about) introduces a more reflective and habitual note to the distorted perception, and the perversion of view (the ideas that we hold dear, even inviolable) transforms our thoughts into fixed ideas or truths.

Ancient Indian philosophy gives this analogy: a man sees a coiled up piece of *rope* in the semi-darkness and perceives it as a snake (perversion of perception); he assumes that what he has seen is *a snake* (perversion of thought); he fashions the view that the coiled up object he has seen in the dark *is* a snake (perversion of view).

As a result, he might never take that way again, or he tell others to avoid that path. Or, perhaps, for some reason, he might look for a stick or stone, and try to kill that snake. If he is observant enough, he would realize, after all, that it is only a coil of rope. However, in real life (ironically), we would blindly (in our hate, fear or ignorance) thrash up the “snake” in the dark, and get rid of it.

Then we move away, thinking that we have got rid of something dangerous and disgusting, and tell our friends about it. The point is that we need to really and carefully check out these “snakes” in our lives before we make any decisive or destructive moves. Otherwise, we would only be fooling ourselves and not even know it.

3 THE FOUR MODES OF PERVERSION. Each level of perversion, in turn, see things in four wrong ways—the four modes of perversion—or, psychological inversion,² that is,

¹ Based on the Introduction to **Vipallāsa Sutta** (A 4.49/2:52) = SD 16.11:
<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/16.11-Vipallasa-S-a4.49-piya.pdf>

what is impermanent	we take to be permanent;
what is painful	we take to be pleasurable;
what is without self	we take to be a (or the) self; and
what is impure (or "evil")	we take to be pure (or "good").

We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. For example, we tend to collect and keep things as if they do not have a shelf life; or we treat others, especially our children or loved ones, as if they would not mature or change.

We tend to take what is painful to be pleasurable. We keep chasing after pleasures, seeking for a higher fix or a constant relationship (meaning that we derive sensual pleasure from it), but the result is always the same: we keep missing what we thought is pleasurable. In this sense (for us at least), the roots of pain lie in pleasure itself.

We tend to take what is without any abiding self to be a self (something eternal). Because we fear death, for example, we hope that there is something "permanent" that survives death, and goes to a place of "everlasting" bliss. But whatever exists can only exist in time, and is as such impermanent. Any idea of something "eternal" must be only imaginative or theoretical. This is all right if we tell stories, but we should be able to tell the difference. This mix-up or inability to tell the difference between reality and imagination makes an idea (no matter how religious or sacred) psychologically and socially harmful.

We tend to take what is impure ("evil") to be pure ("good"). The point is that we do not even have full control of "our own" bodies; so where is this abiding entity called "self" or "soul"? And we think we can improve our "luck" or cheat "fate" by performing rituals to "purify" ourselves, or taking up a certain life-style or status that makes us special. The reality is that this is all in the mind, often reflecting some emotional lack.

4 THE 4 MODES AND 3 LEVELS OF PERVERSION. The perversion of *perception* is said to be fundamental because mental perversion begins with how we recognize or relate to sense-experiences. We tend to superimpose our past conditionings, memories and notions upon present events, so that we never truly see what really is going on before us. We see what we want to see: this is the perversion of perception.

A good example of **the perversion of perception** is how we regard sensual pleasure, especially sexuality (or money, power, or status). As we mature from infancy into adolescence, our **perception** of sexuality is formed (depending of the kind of values we are exposed to and imbibe). Sexual feelings are very impermanent, but we perceive that we can "always" or "only" somehow experience in a physical sense, that is, through our body or that of another. This is the perception of what is impermanent to be permanent.

On the other hand, if we keep thinking about sexuality (or money, or power, or status), about how much we *want* it, this preoccupation only worsens the situation: this is **the perversion of thought**. Thoughts tend to proliferate, to grow in leaps and bounds, and drive us to seek for more and more desirable experiences. Now it will be *quantity* that counts: we have taken an experience to be a *thing*.

If we do not make an effort to stop this perversion of thought, but continue to regard sexuality, money, power, or status as being lasting (or everlasting), pleasurable, self-empowering or good in itself, then we are caught in a rut of **the perversion of view**, which is the deepest end of the perversion trap. In fact, it is the level of addiction.

² See Jack Engler, "Therapeutic aims in psychotherapy and meditation," 1984: 44. Download from <http://www.hakomiinstitute.com/Forum/Issue9/TransformationCn.pdf>.

The bottom line for mental health is to constantly remind ourselves that everything — especially sexuality, money, power, and status—are impermanent, painful, non-self, and impure, in the sense we have reflected here. When we relate to these things of the world in this manner, we begin to understand them for what they really are. They can be good servants, even bring us pleasure in a healthy way, until such time we outgrow all desire for them, and seek a higher pleasure and self-fulfillment—that of spiritual bliss, awakening and liberation.

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