

1. Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living in Ukkaṅkāhā in the Subhaga Grove at the root of a royal sala tree. There he addressed the bhikkhus thus: “Bhikkhus.” [1] -- “Venerable sir,” they replied. The Blessed One said this:

[1] MA explains that the Buddha delivered this sutta to dispel the conceit that had arisen in five hundred bhikkhus on account of their erudition of intellectual mastery of the Buddha's teachings. These bhikkhus were formerly brahmins learned in the Vedic literature, and the Buddha's cryptic utterances may well have been intended to challenge the brahmanic views to which they may still have adhered.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

2. “Bhikkhus, I shall teach you a discourse on the root of all things. [2] Listen and attend closely to what I shall say.” -- “Yes, venerable sir,” the bhikkhus replied. The Blessed One said this:

[2] *Sabbadhammanmūlapariyāya*. M¹ explains that the word “all” (*sabba*) is being used here in the restricted sense of the “all of personal identity” (

sakkāyasabba

), that is, with reference to all states or phenomena (

dhammā

) comprised within the five aggregates affected by clinging (see MN 28.4). Supramundane states – the paths, fruits, and Nibbāna – are excluded. The “root of all things” – that is, the special condition that maintains the continuity of the process of repeated existence – M¹ explains to be craving, conceit, and views (which are the underlying springs of “conceiving”), and these in turn are underlaid by ignorance, suggested in the sutta by the phrase “he has not fully understood it.”

Bhikkhu Bodhi

The ordinary person

3. “Here, bhikkhus, an untaught ordinary person, who has no regard for noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who has no regard for true men and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, perceives earth as earth. Having perceived earth as earth [3]

, he conceives [himself as] earth, he conceives [himself] in earth, he conceives [himself apart] from earth, he conceives earth to be ‘mine,’ he delights in earth

[4]

. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

[3] *Paṃ havim paṃ havito sañjānāti*. Although perceiving “earth as earth” seems to suggest seeing the object as it really is, the aim of Buddhist insight meditation, the context makes it clear that the ordinary person’s perception of “earth as earth” already introduces a slight distortion of the object, a distortion that will be blown up into full-fledged misinterpretation when the cognitive process enters the phase of “conceiving.” MA explains that the ordinary person seizes upon the conventional expression “it is earth,” and applying this to the object, perceives it through a “perversion of perception” (*saññāvipallāsa*

). The latter is a technical expression explained as perceiving the impermanent as permanent, the painful as pleasurable, what is not self as self, and what is foul as beautiful (AN 4:49/ii.52) Nm reads the ablative suffix –to of the Pali as signifying derivation and translates the phrase “From earth he has a percept of earth.”

Bhikkhu Bodhi

[4] The Pali verb “conceives” (*maññati*

), from the root man, “to think,” is often used in the Pali suttas to mean distortional thinking – thought that ascribes to its object characteristics and a significance derived not from the object itself, but from one’s own subjective imaginings. The cognitive distortion introduced by conceiving consists, in brief, in the intrusion of the egocentric perspective into the experience already slightly distorted by spontaneous perception. According to the commentaries, the activity of conceiving is governed by three defilements, which account for the different ways it comes to manifestation – craving (

taṃ hā

), conceit (

māna

), and views (

dīṃhi

).

MA paraphrases this text thus: “Having perceived earth with a perverted perception, the ordinary person afterwards conceives it – construes or discriminates it – through the gross proliferating tendencies (*papañca*) of craving, conceit, and views, which are here called ‘conceivings.’...He apprehends it in diverse ways contrary [to reality].”

The four ways of conceiving (*maññanā*): The Buddha shows that the conceiving of any object may occur in any of four ways, expressed by the text as a fourfold linguistic pattern: accusative, locative, ablative, and appropriative. The primary significance of this modal pattern – enigmatic

in the Pali as well—seems to be ontological. I take the pattern to represent the diverse ways in which the ordinary person attempts to give positive being to his imagined sense of ego-hood by positing, below the threshold of reflection, a relationship between himself as the subject of cognition and the perceived phenomenon as its object. According to the fourfold pattern given, this relationship may be one either of direct identification (“he conceives X”), or of inherence (“he conceives in X”), or of contrast or derivation (“he conceives from X”), or of simple appropriation (“he conceives X to be ‘mine’”).

But care is needed in interpreting these phrases. The Pali does not supply any direct object for the second and third modes, and this suggests that the process at work in conceiving proceeds from a deeper and more general level than that involved in the forming of an explicit view of self, as described for example at MN 2.8 or MN 44.7. The activity of conceiving thus seems to comprise the entire range of subjectively tinged cognition from the impulses and thoughts in which the sense of personal identity is still inchoate to elaborate intellectual structures in which it has been fully explicated.

Ñān, however, understands the implicit object of conceiving to be the percept itself, and accordingly translates: “having had from earth a percept of earth, he conceives [that to be] earth, he conceives [that to be] in earth, he conceives [that to be apart] from earth,” etc.

The fifth phrase, ‘he delights in X,’ explicitly connects conceiving with craving, which is elsewhere said to “delight here and there.” This, moreover, hints at the danger in the worldling’s thought processes, since craving is pointed to by the Buddha as the origin of suffering.

MA gives prolific examples illustrating all the different modes of conceiving, and these clearly establish that the intended object of conceiving is the misplaced sense of egoity. Bhikkhu Bodhi

4. “He perceives water as water. Having perceived water as water, he conceives [himself as] water, he conceives [himself] in water, he conceives [himself apart] from water, he conceives water to be ‘mine,’ he delights in water. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

5. “He perceives fire as fire. Having perceived fire as fire, he conceives [himself as] fire, he conceives [himself] in fire, he conceives [himself apart] from fire, he conceives fire to be ‘mine,’ he delights in fire. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

6. “He perceives air as air. Having perceived air as air, he conceives [himself as] air, he conceives [himself] in air, he conceives [himself apart] from air, he conceives air to be ‘mine,’ he delights in air. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

7. “He perceives beings as beings. Having perceived beings as beings, he conceives beings, he

conceives [himself] in beings, he conceives [himself apart] from beings, he conceives beings to be ‘mine,’ he delights in beings. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

8. “He perceives gods as gods. Having perceived gods as gods, he conceives gods, he conceives [himself] in gods, he conceives [himself apart] from gods, he conceives gods to be ‘mine,’ he delights in gods. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

9. “He perceives Pajapati as Pajapati. Having perceived Pajapati as Pajapati, he conceives Pajapati, he conceives [himself] in Pajapati, he conceives [himself apart] from Pajapati, he conceives Pajapati to be ‘mine,’ he delights in Pajapati. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

10. “He perceives Brahma as Brahma. Having perceived Brahma as Brahma, he conceives Brahma, he conceives [himself] in Brahma, he conceives [himself apart] from Brahma, he conceives Brahma to be ‘mine,’ he delights in Brahma. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

11. “He perceives the gods of Streaming Radiance as the gods of Streaming Radiance. Having perceived the gods of Streaming Radiance as the gods of Streaming Radiance, he conceives the gods of Streaming Radiance, he conceives [himself] in the gods of Streaming Radiance, he conceives [himself apart] from the gods of Streaming Radiance, he conceives the gods of Streaming Radiance to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the gods of Streaming Radiance. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

12. “He perceives the gods of Refulgent Glory as the gods of Refulgent Glory. Having perceived the gods of Refulgent Glory as the gods of Refulgent Glory, he conceives the gods of Refulgent Glory, he conceives [himself] in the gods of Refulgent Glory, he conceives [himself apart] from the gods of Refulgent Glory, he conceives the gods of Refulgent Glory to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the gods of Refulgent Glory. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

13. “He perceives the gods of Great Fruit as the gods of Great Fruit. Having perceived the gods of Great Fruit as the gods of Great Fruit, he conceives the gods of Great Fruit, he conceives [himself] in the gods of Great Fruit, he conceives [himself apart] from the gods of Great Fruit, he conceives the gods of Great Fruit to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the gods of Great Fruit. Why is

that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

14. “He perceives the Overlord as the Overlord. Having perceived the Overlord as the Overlord, he conceives the Overlord, he conceives [himself] in the Overlord, he conceives [himself apart] from the Overlord, he conceives the Overlord to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the Overlord. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

15. “He perceives the base of infinite space as the base of infinite space. Having perceived the base of infinite space as the base of infinite space, he conceives [himself as] the base of infinite space, he conceives [himself] in the base of infinite space, he conceives [himself apart] from the base of infinite space, he conceives the base of infinite space to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the base of infinite space. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

16. “He perceives the base of infinite consciousness as the base of infinite consciousness. Having perceived the base of infinite consciousness as the base of infinite consciousness, he conceives [himself as] the base of infinite consciousness, he conceives [himself] in the base of infinite consciousness, he conceives [himself apart] from the base of infinite consciousness, he conceives the base of infinite consciousness to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the base of infinite consciousness. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

17. “He perceives the base of nothingness as the base of nothingness. Having perceived the base of nothingness as the base of nothingness, he conceives [himself as] the base of nothingness, he conceives [himself] in the base of nothingness, he conceives [himself apart] from the base of nothingness, he conceives the base of nothingness to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the base of nothingness. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

18. “He perceives the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception as the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. Having perceived the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception as the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, he conceives [himself as] the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, he conceives [himself] in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, he conceives [himself apart] from the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, he conceives the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

19. “He perceives the seen as the seen. Having perceived the seen as the seen, he conceives [himself as] the seen, he conceives [himself] in the seen, he conceives [himself apart] from the seen, he conceives the seen to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the seen. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

20. “He perceives the heard as the heard. Having perceived the heard as the heard, he conceives [himself as] the heard, he conceives [himself] in the heard, he conceives [himself apart] from the heard, he conceives the heard to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the heard. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

21. “He perceives the sensed as the sensed. Having perceived the sensed as the sensed, he conceives [himself as] the sensed, he conceives [himself] in the sensed, he conceives [himself apart] from the sensed, he conceives the sensed to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the sensed. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

22. “He perceives the cognized as the cognized. Having perceived the cognized as the cognized, he conceives [himself as] the cognized, he conceives [himself] in the cognized, he conceives [himself apart] from the cognized, he conceives the cognized to be ‘mine,’ he delights in the cognized. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

23. “He perceives unity as unity. Having perceived unity as unity, he conceives [himself as] unity, he conceives [himself] in unity, he conceives [himself apart] from unity, he conceives unity to be ‘mine,’ he delights in unity. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

24. “He perceives diversity as diversity. Having perceived diversity as diversity, he conceives [himself as] diversity, he conceives [himself] in diversity, he conceives [himself apart] from diversity, he conceives diversity to be ‘mine,’ he delights in diversity. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

25. “He perceives all as all. Having perceived all as all, he conceives [himself as] all, he conceives [himself] in all, he conceives [himself apart] from all, he conceives all to be ‘mine,’ he delights in all. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

26. “He perceives Nibbāna as Nibbāna. Having perceived Nibbāna as Nibbāna, he conceives [himself as] Nibbāna, he conceives [himself] in Nibbāna, he conceives [himself apart] from Nibbāna, he conceives Nibbāna to be ‘mine,’ he delights in Nibbāna. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.

The disciple in higher training

27. “Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu who is in higher training, whose mind has not yet reached the goal, and who is still aspiring to the supreme security from bondage, directly knows earth as earth. Having directly known earth as earth, he should not conceive [himself as] earth, he should not conceive [himself] in earth, he should not conceive [himself apart] from earth, he should not conceive earth to be ‘mind,’ he should not delight in earth. Why is that? Because he must fully understand it, I say.

28-49. “He directly knows water as water... He directly knows all as all...

50. “He directly knows Nibbāna as Nibbāna. Having directly known Nibbāna as Nibbāna, he should not conceive [himself as] Nibbāna, he should not conceive [himself] in Nibbāna, he should not conceive [himself apart] from Nibbāna, he should not conceive Nibbāna to be ‘mine,’ he should not delight in Nibbāna. Why is that? Because he must fully understand it, I say.

The Arahant – I

51. “Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu who is an arahant with taints destroyed, who has lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached his own goal, destroyed the fetters of being, and is completely liberated through final knowledge, he too directly knows earth as earth. Having directly known earth as earth, he does not conceive [himself as] earth, he does not conceive [himself] in earth. he does not conceive [himself apart] from earth, he does not conceive earth to be ‘mine,’ he does not delight in earth. Why is that? Because he has fully understood it, I say.

52-74. “He too directly knows water as water...Nibbāna as Nibbāna...Why is that? Because he has fully understood it, I say.

The Arahant – II

75. “Bhikkhus, a buhkkhu who is an arahant...completely liberated through final knowledge, he too directly knows earth as earth. Having directly known earth as earth, he does not conceive [himself as] earth, he does not conceive [himself] in earth, he does not conceive [himself apart] from earth, he does not conceive earth to be ‘mine,’ he does not delight in earth. Why is that? Because he is free from lust through the destruction of lust.

76-98. “He too directly knows water as water...Nibbāna as Nibbāna...Why is that? Because he is free from lust through the destruction of lust.

The Arahant – III

99. “Bhikkhus, a buhkkhu who is an arahant...completely liberated through final knowledge, he too directly knows earth as earth. Having directly known earth as earth, he does not conceive [himself as] earth, he does not conceive [himself] in earth, he does not conceive [himself apart] from earth, he does not conceive earth to be ‘mine,’ he does not delight in earth. Why is that? Because he is free from hate through the destruction of hate.

100-122. “He too directly knows water as water...Nibbāna as Nibbāna...Why is that? Because he is free from hate through the destruction of hate.

The Arahant – IV

123. “Bhikkhus, a buhkkhu who is an arahant...completely liberated through final knowledge, he too directly knows earth as earth. Having directly known earth as earth, he does not conceive [himself as] earth, he does not conceive [himself] in earth, he does not conceive [himself apart]

from earth, he does not conceive earth to be ‘mine,’ he does not delight in earth. Why is that? Because he is free from hate through the destruction of hate.

124-146. “He too directly knows water as water...Nibbāna as Nibbāna...Why is that? Because he is free from hate through the destruction of hate.

The Tathāgata– I

147. “Bhikkhus, the Tathāgata, too, accomplished and fully enlightened, directly knows earth as earth. Having directly known earth as earth, he does not conceive [himself as] earth, he does not conceive [himself] in earth, he does not conceive [himself apart] from earth, he does not conceive earth to be ‘mine,’ he does not delight in earth. Why is that? Because the Tathāgata has fully understood it to the end, I say.

148-170. “He too directly knows water as water...Nibbāna as Nibbāna...Why is that? Because the Tathāgata has fully understood it to the end, I say.

The Tathāgata– II

171. “Bhikkhus, the Tathāgata, too, accomplished and fully enlightened, directly knows earth as earth. Having directly known earth as earth, he does not conceive [himself as] earth, he does not conceive [himself] in earth, he does not conceive [himself apart] from earth, he does not conceive earth to be ‘mine,’ he does not delight in earth. Why is that? Because he has understood that delight is the root of suffering, and that with being [as condition] there is birth, and that for whatever has come to be there is ageing and death. Therefore, bhikkhus, through the complete destruction, fading away, cessation, giving up, and relinquishing of cravings, the Tathāgata has awakened to supreme full enlightenment, I say.

172-194. “He too directly knows water as water...Nibbāna as Nibbāna...Why is that? Because he has understood that delight is the root of suffering, and that with being [as condition] there is birth, and that for whatever has come to be there is ageing and death. Therefore, bhikkhus, through the complete destruction, fading away, cessation, giving up, and relinquishing of

cravings, the Tathāgata has awakened to supreme full enlightenment, I say.

That is what the Blessed One said. But those bhikkhus did *not* delight in the Blessed One's words.

This is one of the most difficult suttas to understand. I'll add notes later. Do not guess anything if you can't understand it. As advised by the translators, come back to this sutta after reading all Majjhima Nikāya. Yi-Lei Wu

Majjhima Nikāya 1

Part One – The Root Fifty Discourses (Mūlapaṭṭhāsapāṭi)

The Division of the Discourse on the Root (Mūlapariyāyavagga)

Translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi