

Looking but not seeing

We often hardly notice what we are doing, and, even less of what we are thinking. We do not notice how views are being formed in our minds, and how we are blindsided by them. For instance, I may see a tree with green leaves, swaying in the wind, with a crow perched on one of its branches.

However, the view that I form in my mind is only that of a tree with green leaves, swaying with the wind, but I do not see or know that a crow is perched on one of its branches. Very soon, my mind moves on to other matters. It would be unusual for me to stop and think about the view I have formed -- even if then the crow flies out of the tree. I may vaguely sense something flying away at the back of my mind, but give it no further consideration.

What has Buddhism to say about this type of unconscious view? Informed Buddhists generally accept that there is *no permanent self*. However, in most cases, even as informed practitioners, we may still be unconscious of this view in the sense that we do not always think about it.

In other words, our views are something that we have thought about from time to time perhaps, but we do not often bring them to mind. We believe that we ourselves and other things are *impermanent*, but, we still do not take enough notice of this fact. We are *insufficiently attentive* to what we see or accept.

It is important to understand this process because, according to Buddhist psychology, being inattentive to impermanence leads to inappropriate and ultimately painful emotional responses of selfishness and attachment. Failing to attend to their impermanence, we tend to cling to things, forgetful of the futility of such an attitude and its imminent disappointment and despair.

If we do not look deep enough, and often enough, into what IS going on right now before us, then all we have are “views” of ourselves, of others and of events in and around us. A view is an incomplete picture of reality, a part of which we mistake for the whole.

Two people may be talking about the same thing, yet they may seriously disagree with one another -- because they view the matter differently. Another reason for their disagreement might be that they assume that words, or at least the words they are using, have fixed meanings. The problem is that they have fixed the meanings themselves, and in many cases, each person is using the words or ideas with their own private meanings.

The more the two persons claim they are right, the more they would disagree! They are arguing from different premises. The best, even only, way out of such an argument is for them to take a different approach. Each person needs to ask and understand what the other person means by the things he says, and to work on that so that there is a common understanding.

In other words, we have to say what we mean, and mean what we say. But what is the meaning of meaning? On a simple level, “meaning” can be said to be either our

intention or view or measure of a thing. While a good level of accuracy certainly helps in the proper understanding and communication of ideas, no matter how well defined words and terms may be, the final interpretation is always in the ear and mind of the listener, that is, depending on *what* we have heard and *how* we have understood it.

The Humpty-Dumpty Rule¹ often applies: we may insist on the meaning of a word, but it may not always be generally accepted or understood so by others. There is something we can learn about words from this famous anecdote:

“I don't know what you mean by ‘glory’,” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don't -- till I tell you. I meant ‘there's a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn't mean ‘a nice knock-down argument’,” Alice objected.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master -- that's all.”

(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-glass*, 1871: ch 6)

This reflection is based on materials from these recommended readings:

1. Unconscious View (SD 31.9): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/31.9-Unconscious-views.-piya.pdf>
2. Sañña: perception (SD 17.4): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.4-Khandha-3-Sanna-piya.pdf>

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¹ This rule properly means an idiosyncratic or eccentric use of language in which the meaning of particular words is determined by the speaker, but is here more broadly applied.