

Perceptions, flowers, and reality

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1. Preamble

This is an extended and updated version of the 2011 ‘Perceptions, flowers, and reality’ (itself the second edition). In July 2015, after a short holiday with my wife Bernie in Yorkshire, I read a chapter in a book by Thich Nhat Hanh [Hanh 2011] that resonated deeply with me – and reminded me of this 2011 article; I was amazed that the original teachings within the Sakyamuni tradition are echoed in *Siegel’s neuro-physiologically informed perspective* – which was the catalyst for the original B6 web article.

Recently, I came across the 2015 revision I was making that never appeared on the web, which is the basis of this present third edition. It is now the Spring of 2020 in the northern hemisphere. With the arrival of Covid 19, our assumptions about our world and its stability have, for many of us, been significantly changed. So this seems a particularly appropriate moment to re-appraise our previous assumptions, and our view of life.

2. Our View of Reality



Our view of reality is influenced by our perceptions and pre-conceived ideas. These pre-conceived ideas build on, as it were, a bank of assumptions about the world. For example, they will include a composite generalised assumption about trees, so whenever we see a tree of any type the “assuming cortex” simply registers “Tree”: meaning a generalised tree concept devoid of the unique tree in front of us.

This means that what we experience is often so coloured by these pre-conceived ideas and perceptions that the experience itself becomes distorted: and it is this distortion that we experience¹. These preconceived perceptions include ideas, thoughts and feelings – in addition to our (unconscious assumptions about) various sensory inputs (e.g. sight; sound; touch..... see below).

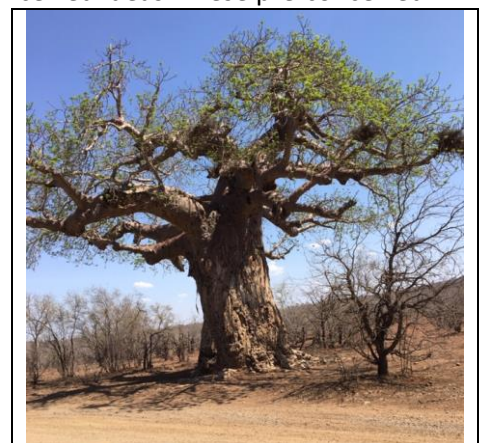


Figure 1: Baobab Tree, South Africa

¹ In these situations, we are axiomatically detached from vivencia, the live experience [de Rivera 2018].

Let us take as a further example a flower. Light rays from the flower enter our eye and strike the retina, and from there neural impulses are relayed to various parts of the brain. There are six layers of cells in the cortical parts of the brain, and the neural impulses eventually get to the 6th and 5th layer (see Figure 2).

However, the top layers of cells in the cortex can easily give us a different picture. As we have already seen many flowers, the 1st and 2nd layers of cells, from their top down perspective, say “just a flower” and so relay this “just a flower” message to the 3rd and 4th layers. These top down neural impulses tend to be very strong, and so will often obliterate the beauty and the wonder of the unique flower that is in front of our eyes. These dynamics are shown schematically below.

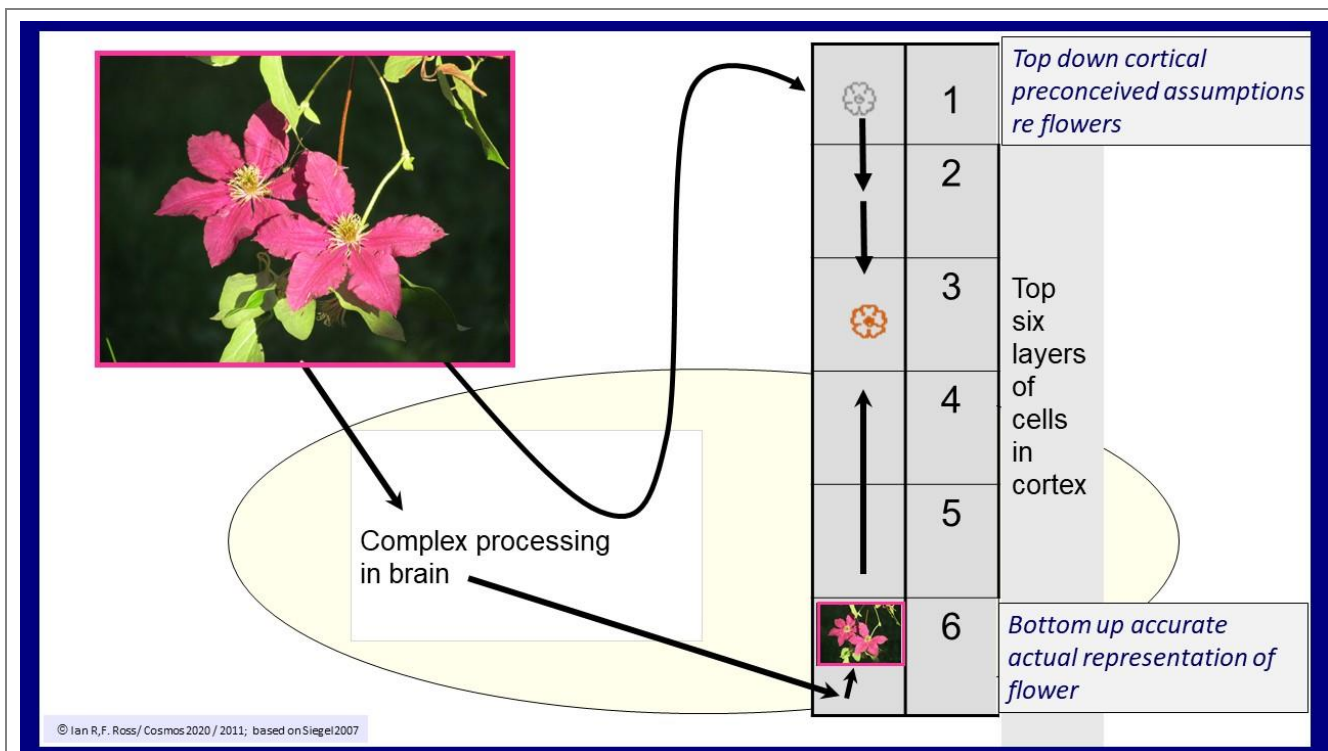


Figure 2

Schematic representation of how Top Down influences distort our perception of the world

Please note: this figure is extrapolated from the text of Siegel 2007 pp 104-107

Comments on Figure 1

- i. Photons from the flowers enter the pupil of the eye and hit the retina.
- ii. From there messages are relayed by complex neural pathways, eventually arriving at the bottom of the six layers of cortical cells – i.e. layers 6 and 5.
- iii. Information is then passed up to say layer 4.
- iv. However, by this stage, by different pathways, layer 1 of the cortex has been alerted to “flower concept”; the cortex thinks it knows all about flowers and so passes its image of a flower down from layer 1 to layer 2.
- v. The top down and bottom up messages meet at level 3, and a composite image is formed: it is this composite image that we subjectively experience, shown in the figure as: 🌸
- vi. Note the distortion from the original image.
- vii. As we learn to become more mindful, we become less influenced by the top down unconscious processes, and so we can begin to recapture the original real flower image depicted in layer 6.
- viii. This involves and embraces being in the Present Moment; or rather, being the Present Moment.

The example given above is of a visual image. In the same way, we may have pre-conceived ideas about, for example, the world, our boss, our friends, our partner, climate change, and music – please see footnote².

We may think other people are saying one thing, but our cortical layers 1 and 2 may be distorting what they are really saying and feeling. This may be part of the essence behind Sakyamuni's teaching on the Lotus Flower (Hanh 1991).

3. Fields of Perception [Hanh 2001]

In the Manifestations-Only Teaching, “the way we perceive reality has everything to do with our happiness and suffering” [Hanh 2001 p 49]; if our view of reality is distorted, this can lead to a great deal of suffering. Our view or reality is particularly likely to be distorted when we are in a highly charged emotional state or are feeling upset / emotionally disturbed. When a lake is calm and peaceful, with no winds blowing over the surface, it reflects the clouds and trees and mountains beautifully – and without distortion; when the surface of the water is perturbed, the clouds, mountains and trees become distorted. The functioning of our brains becomes distorted when we are in the grip of negative affect.

Mental Training such as Meditation, Positive Mental Training, and AT can help us to become truly attuned to ourselves, others, and our environment. At the same time, such disciplines can enhance our Mirror Neurone circuits – and hence our Resonance Circuits.

Our presuppositions influence our perception and conscious realisation of reality. This means that often our conscious “realisation” is a distortion of the original. Our task as human beings is to see reality as it truly is, not distorted by “waves” in our mind. As our minds settle, they are more and more able to reflect reality as it truly is. In an Autogenic session, we have space to become still.

Breathing in, my mind becomes as a still lake.
Breathing out, it reflects true reality.

4. The Lotus Flower

Life is often so busy, and we have so many commitments, that we can lose sight of what is really important. Yet there are wondrous things all around us. We can be so busy and preoccupied with tomorrow that we ignore the wonder of the here and now. Jesus once said: “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, and neither do they spin; and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” If we stop and consider the flowers in a meadow, including dandelions, there is wonder there beyond words.

² In particular, our “Judging Mind” can be at work here – and we may be unaware that we are judging or dismissing others. In the same way, many of us suffer from top down judging of ourselves – often with self-critical thoughts. A thought is just a thought; it may not be based on reality.

- Such a “judging mind” may have its origins in childhood and the (negative) Habit Energies / Procedural Learned Tendencies that we adopted (unconsciously) at an early age as adaptive responses to impossible situations. For further discussion, please see glossary of B19.

Five centuries before these words of Jesus, a spiritual teacher – from what is now northern India – had become aware of the importance of each moment of our lives. Once a month, children came with their parents to a dharma talk that was organised by the monks. On one occasion, the children came with flowers.

The Awakened One's Dharma talk that day was most special. He waited for the children to be seated quietly, and then he slowly stood up. He picked up one of the lotus flowers and held it before the community. He did not say anything.

Everyone sat perfectly still. The Awakened One continued to hold up the flower without saying anything for a long time.

People were perplexed and wondered what he meant by doing that.

The Awakened One looked out over the community and smiled.

Hanh 1991; p 336

One of the men gathered there then also smiled; his name was Mahakassapa.

The white lotus in Gautama's hand had recently blossomed. He held it in a most noble, gentle gesture. His thumb and forefinger held the stem of the flower which trailed the shape of his hand. His hand was as beautiful as the lotus itself, pure and wondrous.

The Awakened one began to speak:

"Friends, the flower is a wondrous reality. As I hold the flower before you, you all have the chance to experience it. Making contact with a flower is to make contact with a wondrous reality. It is making contact with life itself.

"Mahakassapa smiled before anyone else because he was able to make contact with the flower. As long as obstacles remain in your minds, you will not be able to make contact with the flower. Some of you asked yourselves, 'Why is Gautama holding that flower up? What is the meaning of his gesture?' If your minds are occupied with such thoughts, you cannot truly experience the flower.

"Friends, being lost in thoughts is one of the things that prevents us from making true contact with life. If you are ruled by worry, frustration, anxiety, anger, or jealousy, you will lose the chance to make real contact with all the wonders of life.

"Friends, the lotus in my hand is only real to those of you who dwell mindfully in the present moment. If you do not dwell mindfully in the present moment, the flower does not truly exist. There are people who can pass through a forest of sandal-wood trees without ever really seeing one tree. Life is filled with suffering, but it also contains many wonders. Be aware in order to see both the suffering and the wonders of life.

"Being in touch with suffering does not mean to become lost in it. Being in touch with the wonders of life does not mean to lose ourselves in them either. Being in touch is to truly encounter life, to see it deeply. If we directly encounter life, we will understand its inter-dependent and impermanent nature. Thanks to that, we will no longer lose ourselves in desire, anger and craving. We will dwell in freedom and liberation."

Hanh 1991; pp 337 - 339

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When Sakyamuni (the awakened one) held up the lotus flower, most of those present simply saw Sakyamuni holding up a lotus flower.

After some minutes, Mahakassapa smiled. Mahakassapa had real-ised the wonder of that eternal moment: the delicacy, the inter-relatedness, of that flower and of all things: the wonder of this moment, this unique and never to be repeated moment.

Every moment of our lives is potentially *numinous*,
depending upon how we perceive it;
if *this* is not the case,
then maybe all we have to do is be, to re-frame it;
in the reframing,
inter-being is realised.



5. Breaking free of the prison of delusion

As human beings our visions and understanding of life and the world will always be limited, as we can never know the whole story. Yet, in our journey thorough life, continuing to grow and develop can be seen as a sacred task for each of us. The following passage by Einstein illustrates this beautifully.

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us “Universe”, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of liberation, and a foundation for inner security.

Albert Einstein

Quoted by Jon Kabat-Zinn 1990 p 165



Thematically linked articles /

Linked themes in this Autogenic Dynamics section

B19	Reflections on a Secure Base – <i>Bowlby, Ainsworth, Attachment and Well-Being</i> (2017)
C3	Resonance Circuits, Mirror Neurones, and Mindfulness (2011)
C10	Autogenic Training, Insight Meditation, and Mindful Awareness (2011)
D1	Reflections on foundations for mindful living (2011)
D2	Dana Paramita (2011)
D11	Sukha – Paths of Well-Being, PSNS Afferents, and Inner Warmth: from Duhkha to Sukha (2017)
E-03	Look at the Cypress Tree – Autonomic Afferents and Well-Being (2016)
F6.5	Meditation on Constructive Feeling No 5: Inter-Being (planned for Autumn 2020)
F7	Meditation on Five Sounds that can Heal the World (2019)

References / sources

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Hanh, Thich Nhat: 1993b	<i>Thundering Silence – Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake</i>	ISBN 0-938 077-64-3
Hanh, Thich Nhat: 2017	<i>The Other Shore – A New Translation of the Heart Sutra with Commentaries</i>	ISBN 978-1-941529-14-0
Hanh, Thich Nhat 2012A	<i>A Pebble for Your Pocket – Mindful Stories for Children and Grown-ups</i>	ISBN 978-1-935209-454
Kabat-Zinn, Jon 1990 (2006)	<i>Full Catastrophe Living: How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation</i>	ISBN 0-7499-1585-4
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