

CREATIVE WEEKEND

Amaravati 30 Nov. - 2 Dec. 2018

Perception:
How do we
perceive the
world? How
do we create
our world?
Do we have a
choice?



2018 Theme: “Perception (saññā)”

A review of the Creative Weekend by Aj. Cittapāla

The Creative Weekends at Amaravati have started about 15 years ago. The request to have something like a creative retreat for adults came from some parents at the Family Camp. They observed how much their children were enjoying the opportunities for creative painting, drawing and movement provided at the Camp. That was bringing up the wish to have something similar for themselves. Would that be possible at Amaravati?

We decided to give it a try. We started to offer a weekend for Family Camp parents, ex-campers, and later also for anyone who is interested to come to this weekend.

We have developed themes which allowed to explore the Dhamma and meditation in formal practice as well as with creative and more playful means — with drawings, paintings, body work etc.

Recent themes have been

- “Anicca — Impermanence”,
- “The 32 parts of the body”, and in 2018:
- “Saññā — Perception”.

Presently Ajahn Cittapala is leading the Creative Weekends, sometimes on her own, sometimes together with Sister Tisara.

So what has happened during this last Creative Weekend? What was it all about?

What is “perception”?

We are familiar with the English noun “perception”, we know its common meaning. But in everyday language, this word is not used so much. In the Buddhist teachings, that is different. The Buddha is giving us an analysis of the human mind, so that we can observe how it is working. For “perception”, he uses the Pali word *saññā*. What does *saññā* do? Firstly, *saññā* (perception) is receiving and storing in memory the data coming from sense consciousness. As a second step, perception is remembering these data. And thirdly, perception is identifying, recognising, naming or symbolising, or interpreting a given sense object based in this memory.

For example, you hear someone talking. *Saññā* is quickly comparing the voice you hear with other voices stored in memory. If it is a voice that you remember, you will be able to identify who is speaking.

All that can sound terribly complicated. Important for a Creative Weekend is to find **playful ways** to apply teachings like this. For example: on the first evening, the participants were introducing themselves to each other by making a gesture or

movement which was characterising themselves in some way. The others had to guess and name what this movement was indicating for them. Both, the choosing of a characteristic gesture, and the fact that others could “read” or interpret this gesture and give it a name, would not be possible without *saññā*, perception. — It’s happening constantly.

“Perception” is a very interesting theme for a weekend which involves **drawing** activities: drawings are mirroring back to us how we perceive things, how we remember their shape and the visible features which are important for us. Even children have ways to do that. Also, we can see that each person has their own way to remember what their eyes have seen: each of us is creating a slightly different image of the world we perceive.

Drawings can include more than memories of visual information; they can mirror back bodily sensations and mind states. Have a look at the below drawings: The idea was to make a drawing which expresses the feeling of meditating with a full stomach (that’s what we did not too long after the meal on Saturday).



Children's drawings — the connection between feelings + perception

On the first evening we had a slide show with children's drawings to study the development of visual perception in the course of our lives. Children's drawings are wonderful documents, showing how perception is depending on individual experience and memory; and how perception is getting more and more complex with the years:

After a phase of joyful random scribbles which don't "mean" anything, a two-year-old child will make a fundamental "artistic-discovery": *It's possible to depict anything we can see in our environment by drawing a symbol for it.* The child is drawing a circular shape, adds two small dots to indicate eyes, and then it points at the drawing, exclaiming, "Mama" or "Papa" or "that's me" or "my dog" or whatever. That's an evolutionary step we all have done. In a way, it is fundamental for all art, beginning with prehistoric cave drawings, all the way up in history to paintings by

Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, Picasso ...

Full of delight, the child starts adding new symbols to her circles, first eyes and mouth, then lines, symbolising arms and legs, and later fingers too ... They all serve as signs, designations (*saññā*), expressing the child's individual understanding of what he/she has experienced and perceived of this world.

In principle, the same is true for the perception of adults: What seems to be important in our experience gets highlighted and is given more weight and space. So attention and perception will work together. And perception is not necessarily an *objective* representation of reality: It is shaped by what we feel or consider to be important, what we choose to give attention and meaning. The general tendency is that we believe it's true!



You may expect that a child can't draw a person in a very realistic way. Yet, a child tends to draw lines very consciously to give shape to what he/she is able to recognise and make sense of. — In this drawing, that is obviously rain, an umbrella, a boy (?) with a smiling face — indicating that he is happy to hold an umbrella when it's raining).

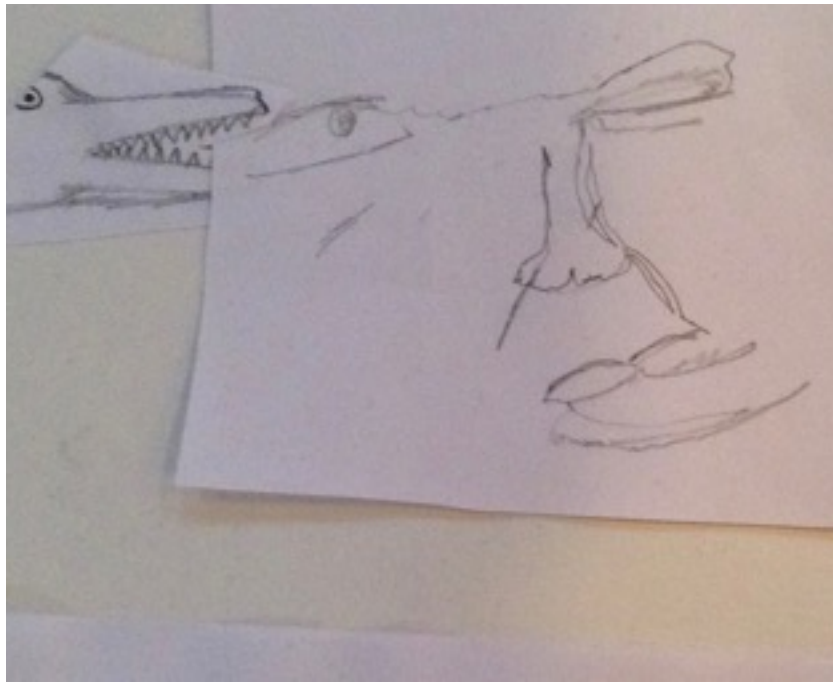
There is something remarkable: one arm is much bigger than the other. Why? Of course, when you are little, you feel you need a "strong" arm to hold an umbrella in an upright position. And look at the fingers: they are drawn very differently from those of the other hand: with much more effort, pressure. So you can imagine that this boy remembered that he had to hold the stick tight. The other arm and fingers have a very different expression ...

Picasso said that he admired (and learned from) children's drawings because of their emotional accuracy.

”Feeling conditions Perception”

The Buddha’s answer for the question “What is a human being?” is very simple: What constitutes a human being are the five *khandas*, the groups, an unenlightened being tends to cling to and identify with:

- body/form
- feeling
- perception
- mental formations
- sense consciousness



Dhamma Contemplation during the CWE:

“Dependent on eye & forms, eye-consciousness arises.

The meeting of the three is contact.

With contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling.

What one feels, one perceives (labels in the mind).

What one perceives, one thinks about.

What one thinks about, one objectifies.

Based on what a person objectifies, the perceptions & categories of objectification assail him/her with regard to past, present, & future forms cognizable via the eye.”

...

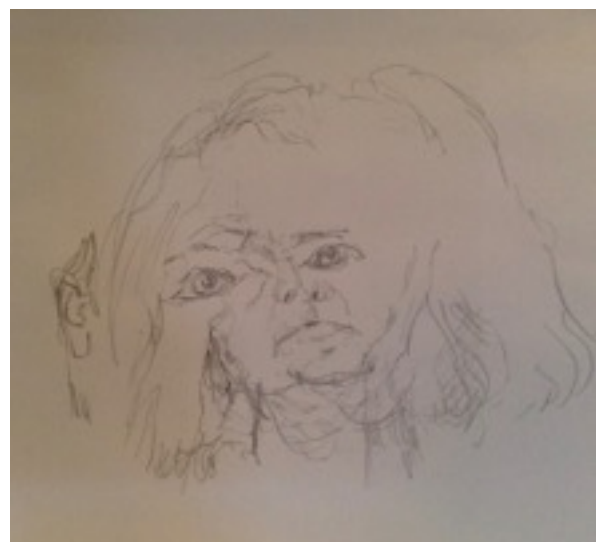
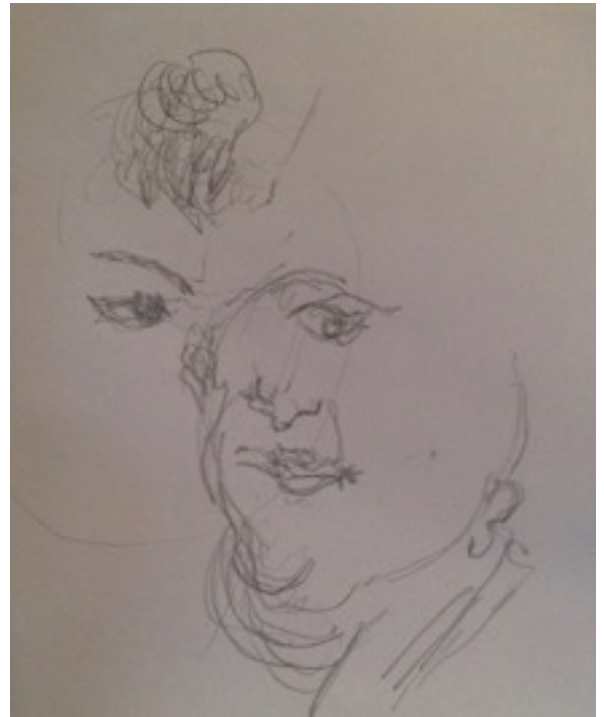
(from the Madhupindika Sutta: “The Ball of Honey” (MN 18), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (BCBS Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.018.than.html>)

The Buddha was teaching that these 5 groups (which we tend to perceive as “self”) are subject to change, are impermanent (*anicca*). Therefore we can’t find lasting happiness in any of them. As we all have experienced: disappointment arises when we expect something to last and make us happy for ever — and then it doesn’t. This is called *dukkha*, the unsatisfactoriness of all conditioned phenomena, the pain which arises when we cling to them. And lastly, there is the characteristic of *anatta*, “not-self:” When all things are changing, what is left to identify with as “me”, “belonging to me”, being the essence of what “I am”, the so-called “self”? Nothing, really. Not easy to understand though, as we are so conditioned to — and suffer from — perceiving things we like as lasting, as promising happiness, as boosting our sense of self, our belief that they are belonging to “me” and are under my control.

What happens when we notice that we are not in control?

Usually, our perceived “sense of self” is very much dependent on the feeling of being in charge, being in control. We tend to suffer a lot when we have the feeling that we lose control, that things don’t go the way we expect them to go. It can make us feel angry or powerless, hopeless and depressed.

During this Creative Weekend, we have explored what happens when we give up control over what we are trying to draw. We did that with so-called *blind contour drawings*, drawing while the drawing paper was covered, so that you can’t see what is happening on your drawing paper while you are drawing. The task was to merely look into the mirror and try to catch the inner and outer contours of your face in every detail; simultaneously, the pencil was steered over the paper in a slow and concentrated way, “blindly” and seismographically picking up every detail of the contours. Ideally, this kind of drawing is done by focusing the attention not only on what the eye can perceive of the face in the mirror, but also by focusing on the breath — which has a calming effect and helps to keep thoughts and judgements in the background (i.e. judgements about the “insignificance” of the line you are drawing or concerns about getting things “right” in terms of proportions and stored visual perceptions). Here are 3 typical results:



Blind Contour Drawings

When we were looking at the results of this session, we shared our surprise about the enjoyable “out of orderliness” of these drawings. Also about the fresh delicacy of the lines, which may catch more detail than in a drawing process where the eye is wandering back and forth between the object and the drawing, bringing to paper the rather simplistic visual symbols for “eye” and other shapes which we have stored in our individual “perception library”.

Saturday evening: Interactive Creative Session

The Buddha has advised his disciples to cultivate skilful perceptions instead of falling prey to our instinctual feelings of greed, hatred and delusion and the rather distorted perceptions which have built up around that.

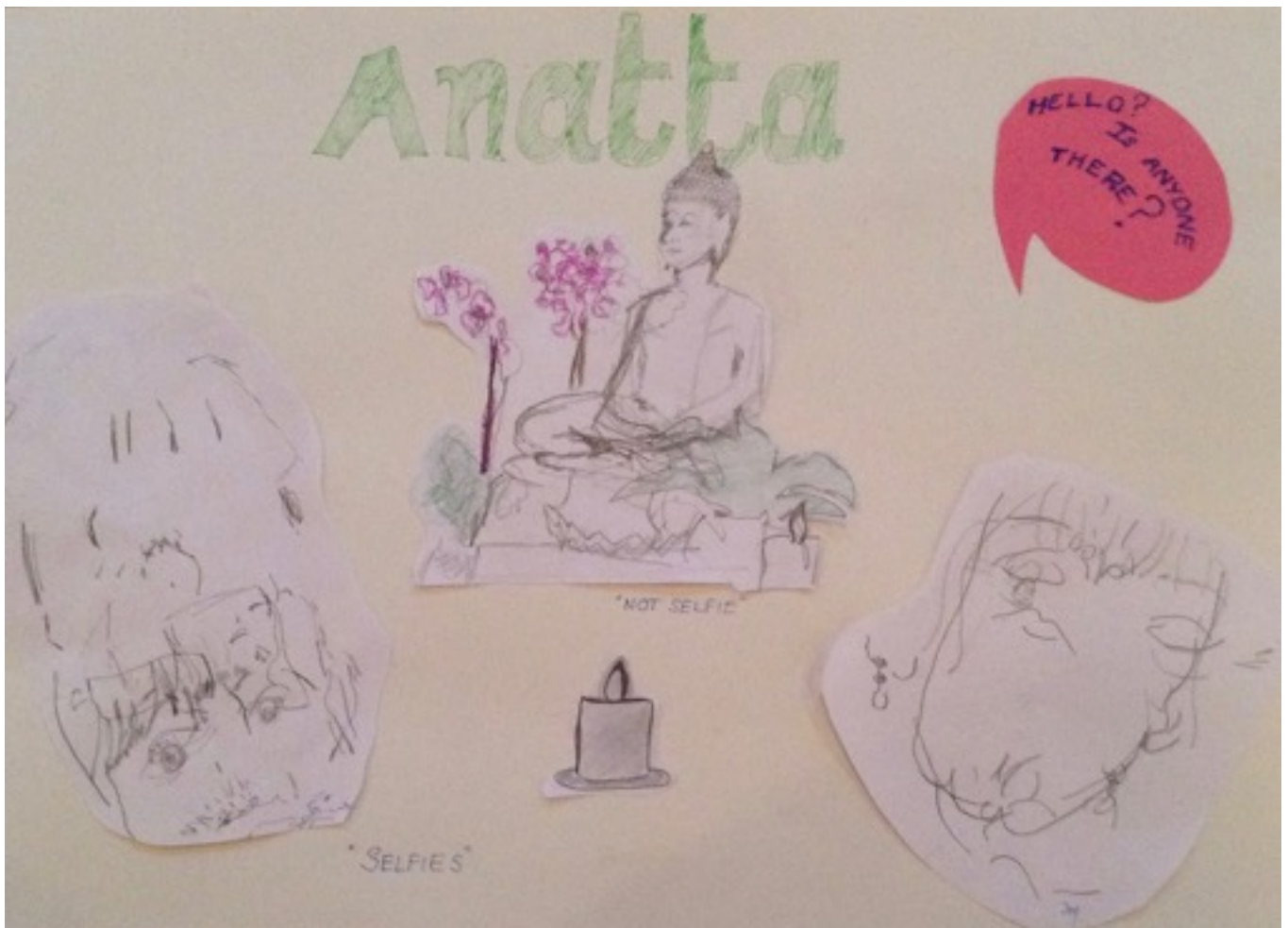
What then are beneficial intentions and perceptions we can focus on? How can we use perception for spiritual learning? He is giving examples: to develop

- the perception of the non-beautiful,
- ... of inconstancy and impermanence,
- ... of not-self
- ...

The Blind Contour Drawings of our faces which we did that afternoon had already highlighted a few of these aspects: wrinkles and the impression of “falling apart” of the expected order. In this way, they had brought the perception of the non-beautiful, of impermanence and inconstancy and of not-self to mind.

So, for the first part of the evening, the participants were encouraged to draw on these experiences and continue individually with more or less blind contour drawings, free to choose inspiring objects for that.

For the second part of the evening, they were coming together in small groups, looking at the drawings of the day and discussing their insights. Then they were asked to *deconstruct* (cut apart) what they had drawn — quite a challenge for the sense of “mine” — and to re-assemble the different parts in a group poster in ways which would reflect their insights. Some examples :





Digesting

The sessions on Sunday were set aside for meditation, Dhamma reflections (see page 4), for digesting individually what had happened during this weekend, and for a closing session. It was becoming clear to everyone that cultivating the perceptions of the non-beautiful, impermanence and not-self can have truly insightful but also slightly disturbing effects to it. And yet there was a sense of valuing these experiences and Buddhist teachings and beginning to realise their liberating potential more deeply. Definitely something which would need some more reflection during daily life ...

The coming Creative Weekend will be Friday 1st - Sunday 3rd November 2019 at Amaravati.
The theme is "Grounding in Being".

If you are interested to join, please have a look at the website www.amaravati.org under "Events Calendar", then click on the search line and choose "Amaravati Family Events" and "November". The weekend is announced under this date.

If you click on the photo, you will see the poster with more details and booking info.

Or visit www.family.amaravati.org