

PERCEPTION

Things are not always black and white – nor on or off! *Al Seckel*

The neuroscientist and illusionist Al Seckel takes the DLD community on a wondrous journey to their minds. By means of visual illusions, he demonstrates that even the most exceptional people who have the means to change this planet in a qualitative way face difficulties in transforming because their belief system is fixed.

“Visual illusions are a window into perception,” explains Al: “They can reveal the hidden constraints of the perception system. Things are not always black and white – nor on or off!” For instance, illusions force people to see things dissimilarly even though they know they are the same and are being tricked. Al defines that reality is that which exists independently of the perception or belief. Meanwhile, the perception may be aligned with reali-

ty, and then, it may not be. He notes that a lot of things happen beneath the level of awareness which elude personal control. Although people have the same underlying perceptual system, they often have different belief systems. The consequences of these differing belief systems include war, conflict and relationship break-ups. Generally, the perceptual system is a three-dimensional organizational framework that allows successful interaction with the world:

1. *What are you looking at?*
The building up of a scene.
2. *What is the meaning of the scene?*
What are you attending to?
3. *What is the overall meaning?*
The building up of a core belief.



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Al Seckel *Scientist*

Al Seckel, formerly of the California Institute of Technology, is internationally recognized as one of the world’s leading authorities on visual and other types of sensory illusions. Seckel has lectured extensively throughout the world. He is a member and contributor to John Brockman’s Third Culture Group, Edge, a group of internationally known thinkers and achievers. Seckel is passionate about education and is the founder and visionary of the Blue World Alliance, a philanthropic foundation devoted to the oceans. He is a former teaching assistant to Carl Sagan, and was a close student and friend of the late legendary Nobel Prize winning physicist Richard Feynman.

The commonalities of the dimensions are that they are rule-based and context-dependent: the rules operate beneath the level of awareness, they cannot be mentally controlled, and their goal is to resolve ambiguity, “mapping” it to support the organizational framework. Proper context is the most important and essential element of information. Inappropriate context can tip the perception. Al presents another argument: „Perhaps your own world view is preventing you from seeing, recognizing and internalizing some ideas that fall outside of our own world view, or could be interpreted differently by others from the way you ‘know’ them to be true.” Once a mental organizational framework is in place, the brain unconsciously prefers to map or „twist“ any inconsistencies or falsehoods in a supportive way.

In the search for meaning, the core belief system – which starts to develop through education at about eight years of age – is another great organizer. Core beliefs are rooted in political views, ethnic stereotypes, conspiracy theories, religious or magical thinking, and are generally robust: “With our core beliefs locked into place, whatever that belief may be, your perceptual system will now try to map all incoming information, even when contradictory, inconsistent, or false, in a way that is supportive to that overall framework. The challenge is to build trust and understanding of how they build their world in order to transform it in a positive way.” Finalizing his presentation, Al appeals to the audience: “Be aware, but not cynical or unduly suspicious.”

