



The Doctrine of Perception in Buddhism

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Abstract

In the Indian classical epistemology major and, perhaps the most controversial issue is the etymology of perception. Most of the Indian philosophical schools accept perception as the primary means of knowledge, but differ on the nature, kinds and objects of perceptual knowledge. The Buddhist epistemology which is known as *pramāna* is the study of right knowledge which is classified into two perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*). Perception or *pratyakṣa* was declared as direct knowledge while *anumāna* was understood as indirect knowledge.

The perceptual objects such as *svabha*, *svalakṣaṇa*, self or the particular nature of the object etc. and whether the external world truly exists or not—all these issues were crucially debated, disputed during the period of Northern Main Buddhist stream or *Nikāya* Buddhism within and out of the Buddhist schools. All these factors are indirectly and directly related to the concept of perception. This paper will broadly focus on the doctrinal controversies such as what can we know, and how we know it i.e. direct and indirect perception among the different Buddhist schools.

Keywords: Buddhist Epistemology (*pramāna*), Perception (*pratyakṣa*), Inference (*anumāna*), Perceptual objects, Buddhist Schools.

1. Introduction

Knowledge plays a very significant role in Buddhism as it is a doorway to enlightenment and nirvana. Gautama, the Buddha, who initiated Buddhist thought was not mere speculative and individualistic thinker. He acquired knowledge and enlightenment not for the only eradication of his own suffering but also eradication suffering of others as well as all living beings. The Buddhist epistemology which is known as *pramāṇa* is the study of right knowledge or the means of right knowledge which is classified into two, 1. Perception (*pratyakṣa*) and 2. Inference (*Anumāna*). Philosophically, Buddhist thought in India has four broad divisions, namely, Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Mādhyamaka, and Yogācāra. The development of Buddhist epistemology was done by with this four early Buddhist schools.

However, according to Buddhist theory of mind all cognitions must have an object and not every cognition, is an act of knowing. Instead, only two types of cognitions – perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*) – can be acts of knowing because only they are reliable (*avisamvāda*) and motivators of action (*pravartaka*), (Buddhist Epistemology, Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2006).

What is the Perception?

The goal of the perception is to provide a coherent and systematic account of the nature of our sensory experiences. Perception simply means cognition, observation, sensitivity, awareness etc. The oldest definition of perception in the Buddhist tradition is the one by Vasubandhu (C. 4th century CE), “perception is a cognition [that arise] from the object [which is represented there in]”, (Frauwallner, 1957). However, later on found more influential and much discussed view on perception, which is simply a cognition “devoid of conceptual construction (*kalpanāpodham*)”.

Perception is again classified into two. They are:

1. Direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) and
2. Indirect perception or representational perception (*apratyakṣa*)

How and what we perceive? What is the instrument of seeing? What are the sources of knowledge? What are the processes of perception? Whether we perceive is corresponded to validity or not? The question of perceptual objects such as *svabha*, *svalakṣaṇa*, self or the particular nature of the object etc. and whether the external world truly exists or not—all these issues were crucially debated, disputed during the period of Northern Main Buddhist stream or *Nikāya* Buddhism within and out of the Buddhist schools. All these factors are indirectly and directly related to the concept of perception.

In this paper, I would like to address about the doctrinal controversies such as what can we know, and how we know it i.e. direct and indirect perception among the different Buddhist schools.

2. Sarvāstivāda's view point on the Direct perception

The central importance of mind continued in the Sarvāstivāda school, the realistic and pluralistic school that developed (in the time of Emperor Asoka that means at least by the middle of the 3rd century B. C.) prior to the emergence of the Middle Way and the Mind Only schools (Dhammajoti, KL 2002). Besides the other Buddhist schools, Sarvastivadins held the view that every dharma is momentary (*kṣaṇikavāda*).

They say that cognition and the object are the two different momentary entities. They are holding the simultaneous causality because cause and effect has a simultaneous relationship i.e. perception and perceptual object change simultaneously giving rise to the direct perception. For the example of the simultaneous arising, they say that when an eye sees the *rūpa* (the perceptual object), at the same time effect (the perception or visual consciousness) is produced. As a result, there is no time gap between them. In other words, the perceptual object as the cause and the perception as the effect arise and cease at the same time. That is to say, the visual faculty and visual object do serve as the conditions for the arising of the visual consciousness.

Therefore, in the Sarvāstivāda point of view, “the sense faculty (the eye) serving as the supporting basis (*āśraya*) and the object serving as the object qua condition (*alambana-pratyakṣa*), necessarily exist in one and the same moment as the sensory consciousness; or the principal of these two requisites started by the Buddha for the arising of the consciousness would be violated. And thanks to the operation of simultaneous causality, the external object can be directly grasped, in spite of universal law of momentariness (Dhammajoti, KL, 2004).” Different Sarvāstivāda masters, especially, Sanghabhadra put forward counter arguments, questions and answers of the opponents' questions in different treatises to show their positions especially against the Sautrāntika.

3. Sautrāntika's view point on the indirect perception

Sautrāntika was an interesting school because it rejected the authenticity of the *abhidharma*, emphasizing the role of discrimination (*vikalpa*) and it wanted to go back to the original teaching of the Buddha contains in sutras. Sautrāntika formulated a very

interesting theory of indirect perception and according to them everything is momentary i.e. mental and external *dharmas*. They believed that we never really know the external world directly and what we perceive-what we take to be an external object is a mental reflection or representation of the object, so that the perception is the process of perceiving mental reflection of the external objects. Sautrāntika claimed that despite the doctrine of successive causation, these mental representations are the effect of the external objects. Consequently, they held that we know of the existence of the external objects by inference (*anumāna*).

Mental images or the reflections of an external object are evidence of that object's existence, although we cannot know it directly. For instance, an object is perceived by the eyes, since everything is momentary, the moment eye perceives an object, it changes, but it leaves its imprint behind the mind. That means in the first moment the eyes absorb the image of it with the help of eye-consciousness, and in the second moment the mind experiences the image (*akara*) from the eye consciousness, not from the object itself. In other words, mind sees the mind itself.

Therefore, this school promotes the idea of one moment gap that is required the second moment thought (this school is also known as *sakara-vijñānavāda* or *sakara-jñānavāda* for that) yet, they “defend by saying that, though these two moments are past moment, and past is not real for Sautrāntika, but there arises a definite serial continuity (*santati*). There is a definite causal continuity likewise the eye in the present moment comes from the eye in the previous moment. There is a serial continuity, that efficacy is passed on the next moment. The requirement is that there must be two conditions for the arising of the consciousness is not violated So for them consciousness is, as it were, the mirror in which the external realities are reflected.

4. Yogācāra's view point on perception

The Mind Only School (*cittamātra*) is the philosophical background of the Mahayana tradition besides Middle Way school. The Mind Only school (founded by two brothers, Asanga and Vasubandhu) arose as an independent and identifiable philosophical tradition in the fourth century C.E. Some people misunderstood Yogācāra as it is a form of metaphysical idealism for its theory of denying the existence of the external object. Yogācāra doctrine is summarized in the term *vijñapti-mātra*, “nothing but cognition only” which also known as “Consciousness Only” or “Mind Only”. This school advocates the existence of the consciousness and cognitive object, not the metaphysical (speculative) object. A metaphysical object is not real, only the mind is real.

Now the question is “what we perceive with our eyes is real?”

An object that we think we see is an illusion according to Yogācāra School. This illusion is due to our habits. These habits come from our minds. This is for our habitual conditioning that we see that things as real and in different way. In other words, only subjective aspect (*darsanabhaga*) is real, not the objective aspect (*nimittabhaga*). The object world is merely the transformation of our consciousness (*vijñanaparinama*). There are a number of appearances along which the Mind Only philosophy developed its doctrines of the primary of consciousness. Its supporters were convinced that objects depend on mind for their nature and being. First, the school put forward the view that a single object appeared differently to different sentient beings. This argument is shown with respect to the six realms of existences. For example, a cup of milk appeared to us as milk, but it would appear as nectar to the gods, as molten iron to hell beings, and as pus or blood to hungry ghosts.

A single object appears differently to different sentient being in the *Samsara* due to their respective karma. In other words, an object appears in different forms according to the conditioned, subjective state of mind. Even we can have this sort of practical examples in our daily lives. For example, an itinerant ascetic, an amorous person and a dog, all catch sight of a woman, but they all have three different notions. The ascetic looks upon her as a mere carcass (made up of five aggregates), the voluptuary or sensualist takes her to be an object of amorous delight while the dog takes her to be something eatable. Thus with reference to one and the same body of the woman, diverse judgments arise according to the preconception and the mental inclination of the different observers. Similarly, the diversity of judgments on part of the empirical world is due to the individual susceptibilities of the subject. Consciousness is indivisible or non-separable and unitary in its nature.

However, Yogacāra School is divided into two schools concerning the doctrinal controversies:

Sākāravāda:

cognition has some form in which it appears to represent an external object: it argues: if cognition has the form of a blue (object) or the like, why one should admit external things? If, again, cognition has no form of a blue (object) or the like, how one can admit external things? In the first case cognition itself serves the purposes of the external things and in the second case in the absence of any form in cognition, external things, if any, cannot be established as there is no other means of cognizing objects except through cognition which must have some forms.

Nīrakavāda:

cognition has no form: it says there is no external reality as has been supported by the ignorant people. Consciousness under the influence of vasana appears as external entities. All appearances are mere illusions (maya). Cognition is devoid of any form but has a self-illuminating nature. In reality, mind is free from any imprint of a supposed external object and is like the sky clear and infinite.

However, the genuine nature of perception, is it in-determinate or determinate, if the importance is given to grasping the object with all the details perception will be defined as determinate. But if the importance is given to the directness of the cognition then perception will be defined as in-determinate. So, it is matter of choice rather than what is factually there.

The two kind of paradigm realistic and constructive are operating field of epistemology. The non-Buddhist school Naiyāyikas are operating within the realistic paradigm where the object is given independently of the knower. It is the phenomenon of knowledge that makes the perceiver aware of the determinate cognition of the object.

The Buddhist are operating within the constructivist paradigm, where the subject is grasping momentary reality with the help of concepts which are necessarily mental constructs, the knower is therefore also constructing the object. The object is partly given and partly constructed whether the object is independent or partly given and partly constructed is not a factual issue.

This is conceptual issue and so in the debates on perception we can see the actual concrete example of philosophical debate where the two parties are arguing for the justification of their paradigm rather than arguing about a specific matter of fact. The problem of perception or other concept of perception is one of the fundamental issues in philosophy both Indian as well as western.

5. Conclusion

During the *Abhidharmic* period, the topic of perception is heartedly discussed and debated among the Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools and they arrived in two contrasting views—direct and indirect perception.

Although there cannot be two truths concerning one issue, however, different sages and philosophers see same manner from different perspectives with the logical argument and proper disciplines desiring proper, fully and systematically understand the Buddha's

profound teachings. Therefore, ultimate purpose of this *Abhidharmic* analysis on perception is not for mere intellectual studies but must serve the only purpose of spiritual development and realization.

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