

## ON PERCEPTION

*A Brief Philosophical Re-examination of a Modern Interpretation of some Concepts in early Buddhistic thought.*

### *Introduction*

The *Mahā-hatthipadopama-sutta* in early Buddhistic thought attempts an exposition of 'perception' phenomenologically, though in a very primitive sense. Some other suttas follow suit. The central notions in the *Mahā-hatthipadopama-sutta*, in particular gives emphasis to visual perception as against auditory perception, olfactory perception, etc. Concerning 'perception' four necessary and sufficient conditions are noted in this sutta. They are as follows: (i) the internal visual sense organ (the eye) intact; (ii) the external physical object coming into the percipient's range of vision; (iii) sensory impingement and (iv) an appropriate act of awareness on the part of the percipient (this can be referred to as successful perception-occurrence).<sup>1</sup> The condition (ii) above can be made explicit to mean "the coming of the external physical object (which exists independently of the perception of the percipient) within the range of his vision." Without its ontological existence, a perception-occurrence is logically impossible.

The above assertion, we contend, favours a kind of causal theory of perception in a somewhat primitive sense. All causal theories of perception, in whatever forms they appear, take as their central notions the existence of the physical object and the effects it produces. These notions, remotely of course, suggest a causal theory of perception. What is emphasised by the statement "the internal visual sense organ (the eye) intact" is that the eye, which is one of the central sense organs in the human body, plays a central role in producing an effect, viz., veridical or non-veridical perception-occurrence. If one accepts the necessity of a sense organ for effecting 'perception', then the theory which such an acceptance would imply is a causal theory of

perception. We hope to make explicit this point in what follows.

D. J. Kalupahana,<sup>2</sup> a renowned Buddhist scholar has expressed the view to the effect that a kind of phenomenalism is entailed in early Buddhistic thought and seeks to clinch his argument by bringing such modern notions as 'sense-datum,' which came to be introduced in the West recently owing to theoretical speculations in Science and Mathematics. We wish to argue against Kalupahana's contention, impressive though it may be.

#### *Causal theory of perception*

A comprehensive version of a causal theory of perception must include the notions of veridical perception and non-veridical perception. As regards veridical perception, the roles of the sense organs and of causal ancestry and the material object are necessary and sufficient. In non-veridical perception, the role of the physical object (the material object) is inoperative, while those of the sense organs and causal ancestry remain.

With reference to veridical perception, the argument in the suttas in early Buddhistic thought can be formulated in this way: Let the percipient be X and the physical object, Y. If it is true that X perceives Y, then by necessity, the following is the case:

- i. there is sensory impingement which is an effect;
- ii. there is an appropriate act of awareness on the part of the percipient; and
- iii. the elements which are causally responsible for this effect are
  - a. the physical object Y and
  - b. the bio-chemical system of X, the percipient.

It is clear now that sensory impingement, an appropriate act of awareness on the part of the percipient and the physical object are equally significant for veridical perception. However, conceptually speaking, "sensory impingement," "awareness," "physical object" and "perception" are the

central concepts that form the conceptual family. If epistemological justification is demanded, the suttas in early Buddhist thought must provide relevant data to justify the claim that to perceive a physical object Y involves sensory impingement which is causally accounted for by the existence of the physical object Y on the one hand and X the percipient on the other.

### *Perception and conditions*

We shall first attempt an examination of perceptual elements phenomenologically. In the first instance, the point I made about the bio-chemical system of X, the percipient, may be controversial. But, then, the suttas are emphatic about the necessity of "the existence of an internal sense organ intact" as a precondition for perception. The significance of the bio-chemical system of man or X, the percipient, therefore follows. It is this point that introduces new support for our view, namely, that the perceptual reflections in early Buddhism makes explicit a kind of causal theory of perception in a somewhat primitive sense. The following passage in the *Madhupndikasutta* strengthens the above contention: "Visual consciousness arises because of (the) eye and (because of) material shapes, (and) the meeting of the three (that is to say, visual consciousness, the eye and material shapes) in sensory impingement (on each other); what one feels one perceives, what one perceives one reasons about\* . . ."<sup>3</sup> In this passage, the words *eye* and *one* (one-self or one's bio-chemical system) are noted, and, if "an appropriate act of awareness on the part of the percipient"<sup>4</sup> is emphasized with regard to perception, then, phenomenologically, some form of a causal theory of perception is strongly suggested, the reason being that the necessity for sensory impingement on the one hand and the bio-chemical system of man on the other is accorded recognition. The contribution by the bio-chemical system and the material object towards effecting perception-occurrence is enough to enrich a *causal* connection.

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\* The items in brackets are introduced into the English translation in order to make the sense of the original absolutely clear.

Veridical perception as noted in these suttas, if it is broken down, may be seen to involve the following: (i) From a phenomenological point of view, sensory impingement, awareness and perception; and (ii) from an ontological point of view, the bio-chemical system with its sense organs and the physical object. A set of significant differences are made explicit here between "sensory impingement," and "awareness" on the one hand and "awareness" and "perception" on the other. This dual difference is a cardinal feature of any *causal theory of perception*. For, "sensory impingement," "awareness" and "perception" are but *caused*. To put it still more explicitly, "perception" ("veridical perception") is an effect which should be understood causally in relation to "sensory impingement" and "awareness." Alternatively, "perception" cannot be understood by reference to sensory impingement and sense data in the sense understood in contemporary sense-data philosophy, which advocates a kind of phenomenalism, the reason being the central emphasis given to *causation* in early Buddhism. We have already seen how it brings forward sensory impingement and perception phenomenologically. It primitively suggests a causal theory of perception as against any kind of phenomenalism.

This point is strengthened a very great deal by the emphasis on the ontological phenomenon, "material shape." For instance, the *Mahā-hatthipadopama-sutta* says, "Visual consciousness arises because of (the) eye and (because of) material shapes." D. J. Kalupahana, however, expresses a basically different view. He says, "The so-called primary existents represented by earth (paṭhavi), etc. are nothing but sense data. Hence, earth, for example, is defined as grossness (kakkhalatā). On the other hand, there are specific statements that knowledge of the external world is based on experience (vedanā), and that this experience is dependent on contact with sense data (phassa). Hence, any theory about the nature of the external world has to be based on the sense data (phassa), and speculation that goes beyond sense data would be metaphysical and futile."<sup>5</sup> The above

is a complex statement which covers several phenomenological data unclearly put together. Kalupahana's suggestion is that the perceptual statements in the suttas imply a kind of phenomenalism. Let us analyse Kalupahana's contention confining ourselves to the central contents just mentioned. Our claim is that the perceptual elements found in the suttas and therefore in the Buddhistic Nikāyas suggest a primitive causal theory of perception. We shall begin our justification of this claim with a consideration of the statement: "Visual consciousness arises because of (the) eye and (because of) material shapes..." These words refer to a significant notion, namely, "material shape," which is not the one to be emphasized centrally in any sense-data theory either in a primitive sense or in a more modern sense. It is noteworthy, therefore, at this juncture, to try to explicate Kalupahana's alternative notion "visible form," which replaces "material shape"<sup>6</sup> in I. B. Horner's translation. Is the notion "visible form" equivalent to that of "colour" or "shape" or "patch" or "sound" as expounded by G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, A. J. Ayer, etc.? According to modern sense-data thinkers, "colour," "shape," "patch," "sound," are but sense-data which are basically different from physical objects.<sup>7</sup> It appears that Kalupahana is assuming that "visible form" is equivalent to a "sense datum" in the modern sense. However, he does not argue his case convincingly. This is clear from his attempt to read some kind of phenomenalism into certain perceptual claims in the suttas in the Buddhistic Nikāyas. In order to develop his view, he represents *phassa* as sense data. However, the notion of a sense-datum remains inappropriate or seems to have brought in conflicting contexts which work at cross-purposes. The concept of *phassa paccaya vedanā*<sup>8</sup> (meaning: "depending on contact is feeling"), surely need not implicitly contain a controversial sub-concept such as "sense-datum." The introduction of a notion of a sense-datum by Kalupahana at the outset itself poses a significant problem, namely, that relating to precisely the logical status he gives to sense-data. And the status he gives it is some kind of a factual status. This is strongly evident from his assertion

to the effect that "...there are specific statements that knowledge of the external world is based on experience (*vedanā*), and that this experience is dependent on contact with sense-data (*phassa*), and speculation that goes beyond sense data would be metaphysical and futile."<sup>9</sup>

But, then, firstly, if experience is dependent on contact with sense-data, is it not the case that

- (i) "experience" and
- (ii) "contact with sense-data"

are two different categories, such that the former is subjective and the latter characterised some sort of objectivity. Ontologically, sense-data must be *there* to effect "contact with sense-data." Unless Kalupahana gives a very different meaning to the phrase "contact with sense-data", it empirically implies just the meaning we have just noted. If sense data are *there* for one to *contact*, it follows that they are neither mental creations nor physical objects but *verifiable data* according to Kalupahana. However, the premise as well as the conclusion of his argument are dubious, for the logical status of sense-data stands underlined on the one hand and cloudy on the other. They are given, primitively, a status that may be said to be similar to that of physical objects; yet the relation between sense-data and physical objects is not dealt with. He may try to get out of this predicament by arguing that the theory implicitly embodied in the suttas which emphasise 'perception' represents "a form of phenomenalism," so that the notion of a physical object would not be necessary. But we contend that such an argument would be unconvincing for there is an acceptance of the notion of a physical object. In support of this contention, we shall quote the following significant passage which we believe will confirm our exposition. The passage is as follows: "...just as a space that is enclosed by stakes and creepers and grass and clay is known as a dwelling, so a space that is enclosed by bones and sinews and flesh and skin is known as a material shape."<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the notion of a physical object (a material object) plays a central role. From this we conclude that the notion of a sense-datum does

not occupy a central place in these primitive perceptual reflections.

And secondly, to make explicit 'phenomenalism,' Kalupahana heavily depends on J. H. Baldwin's exposition of 'phenomenon' in the Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology. This introduction is good but at the same time effort should have been made to reveal the limitations on the subject matter at hand. Buddhism, the religion which is preached by the Buddha,<sup>11</sup> conceptually embodies a very ancient cultural environment (pastoral) in the Indian civilization. But Baldwin's notion of 'phenomenon' is coloured by Contemporary epistemology which sprang out of theoretical speculations in modern science (technological environment) in the Western world. This in turn is embedded in Graeco-roman civilization. Philosophically speaking, what emerges into explicitness are conflicting contexts, viz., religion (the religious context) and science (the scientific context) which work at cross-purposes. Culture-wise as well as context-wise, Buddhism and Modern science are basically different. To put the point differently, their natures are poles apart and goal-wise, they can be distinguished from each other. It is unwise on the part of Kalupahana to ignore these significant differences.

Phenomenalism, very broadly speaking, maintains that physical object statements entail some statements about sense data, but not vice versa. This theory poses a central problem, that is to justify the move from these to a world independent of ourselves. If phenomenalism deals with only sense data as Kalupahana maintains, then one would be confined to one's own experiences in complete solitude. If so, the theory is unverifiable in principle. But, however, we need not end up in solipsism as happened in Kalupahana's exposition, for the Nikāyas do admit the existence of physical objects (material objects). For instance, in Mahā-hatthipadopama-sutta, ontologywise, a "cause" is operative with regard to "painful feeling."<sup>12</sup> The same is the case with the Madhupiṇḍika sutta in which "the eye" and "the material shape" are clearly emphasised as *causes*.<sup>13</sup>

*Phenomenalism or Causal theory of perception*

If what Kalupahana says is the case, namely, that all that we sense are sense data, what would be the nature of the external world? With reference to this problem, there is little that Kalupahana has to offer. It is wrong to say that the emphasis "is on sense data as the content of our empirical knowledge, with denial of any real substratum behind phenomena."<sup>13a</sup> But, then, "a denial of any real substratum behind phenomena" (=X) is one thing, and, "the acceptance of sense-data as the content of our empirical knowledge" (=Y) is another thing. To put it differently, Y does not follow by necessity from X. Our contention is that X can be entertained without entertaining Y and vice versa. Alternatively, there has been no attempt to explain or analyse away physicality factually by sense data. Nor does it explain or analyse away physicality conceptually, by a notion of a sensedatum; for it affirms both sensory impingement and the physicality in such a way that neither is reducible to the other nor is physicality explained away by sense data. This is evident from the acceptance in the *Mahā-hatthipadopama-sutta* of a view to the effect that visual consciousness arises because of the eye and of *material shapes* (the word in Kalupahana's translation is 'visible form'). To put the matter still more explicitly, while the eye and material shapes are considered to be causes of certain effects, there is no effort here to analyse away physicality, factually or conceptually, by sense data. It is incorrect, therefore, to characterise such a theory as a type of phenomenalism. For Kalupahana's contention, as already noted above, is that the content of our empirical knowledge is sense data so that ontologywise, an acceptance of a physical object is not satisfactory. However, the *Madhupīṇḍika sutta* and the *Mahā-hatthipadopama-sutta* centrally entertain the notion of a physical object of a very special kind whose characteristic is substratumlessness. Alternatively speaking, this contention, by necessity, does not lead us to an acceptance of a type of phenomenalism which springs out of a notion of a sense datum. The concept of a physical object, when laid bare, may lead to a substratumless object; yet it can be called a physical object

without getting involved in self-contradiction or in a fallacy. The reflections in the suttas already noted, primitively speaking, permit such a view; but, then, it is problematic whether such reflections can lead us to the type of phenomenalism that Kalupahana reads into them. Though his contention is that "the emphasis on sense data as the content of our empirical knowledge," yet it remains unsubstantiated. As a logical point, the emphasis in them seems to be on (i) sensory impingement, (ii) causal production and (iii) the material shapes (physical objects = material objects), and from these, it is doubtful that what Kalupahana entertains follows at all.

This point would further be made explicit if (ii) and (iii) above are analysed more fully. This we shall attempt now. Human physiology has it that the nervous system receives rapidly moving chains of impulses. This is a well known fact. It is appropriate to look at this fact not in order to make it better known but simply to explicate its meaning in the context of our main argument — that the perceptual reflections in the suttas entertain the view that there are physical objects which are also the causes of our veridical perceptions. The sense organs and physical objects (material shapes) play significant roles in producing veridical perceptions. If the physical object is non-present, a perception can still be produced, but it remains basically a non-veridical perception, for instance, an illusory perception or an hallucinatory one. The primitive perceptual model in primitive Buddhism as embodied in the *Nikāyas* is thus apparent, and it is clear that the notion of a physical object is centrally vital. To put it differently, the notion of a physical object plays a centrally significant rôle in producing a veridical perception or a true perception. And, therefore, reading a notion of a sense-datum into the account, as is done by Kalupahana, is unnecessary.

Owing to set Western conceptual (hence philosophical) orientations, the use of perceptual concepts are, very often, neatly arranged in conceptual families or conceptual schemes as noted by later Wittgenstein, Hamlyn, Ryle and others.

But such perceptual concepts become increasingly cloudy when considered against the perceptual reflections in primitive Buddhistic thinking in particular. The reason relates to the limitations of the subject matter at hand within which we are compelled to operate. Accordingly, the perceptual reflections in the suttas do not attempt to account for a notion of a sense datum by the existence of the physical object (the material shape), Y. Alternatively, they do not record a notion of a sense datum to be explained by the existence of a physical object (the material shape), Y.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the perceptual reflections implicit in the suttas of the Buddhistic *Nikāyas* simply attempt, in a very primitive sense, to characterise the central notions concerning a veridical perceptual situation. As we pointed out earlier too, from these perceptual reflections, a primitive causal theory of perception can be elicited. What we mean here by the word 'primitive' is that the theory is not on a par with modern causal theories of perception which successfully account for both veridical and non-veridical perceptions.

Once the central perceptual concepts in these suttas are made explicit, very briefly of course, in this way, certain other claims Kalupahana makes may be seen to be unwarranted. One such claim is that "speculation that goes beyond sense data would be metaphysical and futile." If this statement is true, any claim which asserts the existence of a physical object is both metaphysical and futile as it involves much more than mere sense data. Do the texts of the suttas which emphasize perceptual reflections substantiate this claim of Kalupahana? Not at all. What the texts make explicit is that the external objects impinge on our sense organs in the form of stimuli; and as and when the mind is attentive to these stimuli, sense-impressions or sense data are produced. The *Nidāna* Book testifies to this conclusion thus: "On account of the organ of sight and visual objects there arise visual consciousness. And the meeting of these three, i.e. the organ of sight, visual objects and visual con-

sciousness, jointly contribute to generate a visual sense-datum:" ("cakkhum ca paṭicca rūpaṃ ca paṭicca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṃ tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso").<sup>14</sup> Accordingly we see that the perceptual assertions in these suttas do accept the notions of "physicality," "sense organic body-sensitivity" and "mechanism of the mind." And they clearly point to something much more than mere sense-data (impressions). What emerges into explicitness is the impossibility of "phenomenalism" which is read into perceptual assertions in the suttas of the Buddhist *Nikāyas*, by Kalupahana.

Conceptually speaking, it looks impressive to judge statements that endorse the existence of physical objects as metaphysical. However, this argument needs to be established, and Kalupahana does not even attempt to provide an argument in this connection. Therefore, the kind of phenomenalism he reads into perceptual reflections in the suttas remains both vulnerable and problematic. Is it valid to see a kind of phenomenalism in the perceptual reflections just mentioned? We contend it is invalid. And we argue for our case as follows: The *Mahā-hatthipadopama-sutta* deals with a valid perception-occurrence in this way: "But when your reverences, the eye that is internal intact and external material shapes come within its range and there is the appropriate impact, then there is thus an appearance of the appropriate section of consciousness."<sup>15\*</sup> A notion of a sense-datum is not contained either in a primitive sense or in a modern sense in this passage, which can be considered as centrally important for reflections on perception.

In any event, Kalupahana's judgment, namely that "...speculation that goes beyond sense data would be metaphysical and futile," is nebulous. What, for instance, does his statement mean? Very lucidly speaking, its scope

\* For ease of comprehension, a literal rendering of the original will follow here, for a rendering that reads more easily: "But when, your Reverences, external material shapes (physical objects) come within the range of the eye that is intact internally and the appropriate impact is made, then, in this manner, does the appropriate aspect of consciousness appear."

is so limitedly drawn that the only notion that is incorporated within non-metaphysics is that of a sense-datum. And, therefore, conceptual models, mathematical symbols, scientific entities, physical objects and physical existents are pushed into *metaphysics*, which is characterized as futile. But is not this conclusion too harsh on the one hand unwarranted on the other in the context of the major conceptual tenets in the suttas? We contend that the suttas clearly accept the notion of a physical object, and that they also accept the notion of a cause. According to Kalupahana's position, we are now in the territory of *metaphysics*. But surely this position remains unestablished, for the suttas in the Buddhist *Nikāyas* clearly accept the notions such as "sensory impingement," "percipient," "physical object" and "cause". If so, according to Kalupahana's premise the conclusion must be that the perceptual reflections in them are also metaphysical. But however this conclusion does not follow from the central notions in the suttas. To put the point yet more explicitly, the suttas accept the notions of "sensory impingement," "percipient," "physical object" and "cause;" and, therefore, they suggest neither phenomenalism nor metaphysics as conceived by Kalupahana but a causal theory of perception, in a primitive sense.

Therefore, the notion of the external world, as conceived in the Buddhistic suttas is not something which has got to do with sense-data. For notions of a percipient and of the physical object are centrally accepted here as playing significant rôles in connection with perception-occurrence phenomenologically. Accordingly, ontologywise, that is to say, in relation to what exists and in what way, the suttas note physical objects and percipients on the one hand and causal conditioning on the other. The point is highlighted thus: "This painful feeling that has arisen in me is born of sensory impingement on the ear, it has a cause, not no cause."<sup>16</sup> The notions in the suttas once they are made explicit in this manner, work together to bring about a kind of causal theory of perception and not a kind of phenomenalism. What is implicative, therefore, is the physical nature of the external world as against the phenomenal nature

Kalupahana superimposes on the external world, and from this a *primitive* causal theory of perception emerges into explicitness.

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#### NOTES

1. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, ed. V. Trenckner and R. Chalmers, London, PTS: Tr. I. B. Horner, Middle Length Sayings, Vol. I, London, PTS., 1954-9, 190.
2. *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, D. J. Kalupahana, The University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1975, p. 70.
3. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, Middle Length Sayings (*op. cit.*,) 111.
4. *Ibid.*, 190.
5. *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (*op. cit.*,) p. 70.
6. "rūpa" — *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, (*op. cit.*,) 190.
7. Research Papers: Philosophy, A. D. P. Kalansuriya, Lake House Printers and Publishers Ltd., Colombo, 1972, Paper I, pp. 1-14.
8. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, (*op. cit.*,) pp. 111-2.
9. *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, (*op. cit.*,) p. 70.
10. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, Middle Length Sayings, Vol. I, (*op. cit.*,) 190.
11. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. II, Middle Length Sayings, Vol. II, Tr. I. B. Horner, London, PTS., 1954-9, 211.
12. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, Middle Length Sayings, Vol. I, (*op. cit.*,) p. 232.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 13A. *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (*op. cit.*,) p. 87.

14. *Samyutta Nikāya*, Vol. II, Ed. L. Feer, London, PTS., Tr. C.A.F. Rhys Davids and F. L. Woodward, The Book of the Kindred Sayings, Vol. II, London, PTS., 1917-30, 72.
15. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, Middle Length Sayings, Vol. I, (*op. cit.*), p. 236.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

## NOTES

1. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, ed. V. Trenkner and E. Grahner, London, PTS., Tr. L. H. Horner, Middle Length Sayings, Vol. I, London, PTS., 1954-9, 190.
2. Gensler, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, U. A. Karpachansky, The University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1975, p. 70.
3. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, Middle Length Sayings (*op. cit.*), 111.
4. 1954-190.
5. Gensler, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (*op. cit.*), p. 70.
6. "Notes" - *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, (*op. cit.*), 190.
7. Research Papers: Philosophy, A. D. P. Kalansuria, Late Home Printer and Publisher Ltd., Colombo, 1975, Paper I, pp. 1-14.
8. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, (*op. cit.*), pp. 11-2.
9. Gensler, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (*op. cit.*), p. 70.
10. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, Middle Length Sayings, Vol. I, (*op. cit.*), 190.
11. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. II, Middle Length Sayings, Vol. II, Tr. L. H. Horner, London, PTS., 1954-9, 211.
12. *Majjhimā Nikāya*, Vol. I, Middle Length Sayings, Vol. I, (*op. cit.*), p. 232.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
14. Gensler, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (*op. cit.*), p. 87.