

**THE DHAMMA AND THE NOTION OF 'PERCEPTION' :
A CONCEPTUAL TECHNIQUE MADE EXPLICIT**

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to elicit the nature of the notion of 'perception' in the Buddha's Dhamma. Philosophically speaking, in a discussion of this kind, one cannot ignore the same notion current in Western epistemologies, with special reference to those in recent philosophies in the English-speaking world. It shall be shown, at the end, that the Buddhist notion of 'perception' is not epistemological and therefore Buddhist philosophers who concentrated heavily on an 'epistemology', err.

Current Philosophical Deliberations

It is supposed in the current Western epistemologies that human perception, the exercise of human senses has a stratified character—that it has foundations. It is the concern of the philosopher to make explicit (to lay bare) what these foundations are on the one hand and on the other to show how, and how much of what passes for knowledge was or could be securely supported upon them. 'Perception', accordingly, being consequential, problems relating to it are weighty also. But, then, what are the problems that arise about perception? They are as follows :

- i) The nature of those entities of which in perceiving, we are directly, immediately aware;

- ii) The interpretation or construction by way of which we pass from awareness of such entities to our complex perception of and judgements about the things in our physical environment which we perceive.

It was argued in recent epistemological discussions on these matters, especially in the English-speaking world (England, America, Canada, Australia and so on) that the problems were *not* ontological but linguistic. That is, it is not a question of two kinds of thing, namely, sensedata and material things—but of two different kinds of language, i.e., sense-datum language and material-object language. The conceptual techniques of such philosophers as Wittgenstein and Austin have contributed a great deal to this change in the nature of perception-talk (debate on perception). The aim in this paper is to note the nature of the problem to overcome the apparently irresolvable dilemmas which beset the philosopher. Wittgenstein once noted: that philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.¹ Bewitchment causes confusion and so, if the problems of perception, as traditionally conceived (noted above) are problems of philosophy, then they have the form: "I do not know my way about".² That philosophy helps one to find one's way, to survey the territory, not to provide with new or more information, but adds clarity by a careful description of language. The later-Wittgenstein's contribution, unfortunately, appears ignored by the thinkers who deal with perception: "...while it altered the ostensible aim, appeared not greatly to change the form of the traditional and familiar issues. These appeared to survive, more fashionably dressed".³ Such authors as R. J. Hirst, Don Locke, D. M. Armstrong, etc., are important here. Not only are these philosophers and epistemologists concerned with the nature of those entities of which in perceiving, one is directly immediately aware, but also in some

kind of construction by way of which one passes from such entities to complex perceptual knowledge. One significant implication is an epistemology-orientation of the notion of 'perception'.

The Notion of 'Perception' in the Dhamma

Now with this epistemological base of the notion of 'perception' and the linguistic approach in our mind, we shall attempt to analyse that of 'perception' in the Buddha's Dhamma. The notion of 'perception' ingrained in the Dhamma, though sounds as it is epistemological, it is not so. But, then, what is the nature of 'perception' in the Dhamma? The *suttas* known as the *Mahā-hattinipadopama-sutta* and the *Madhupiṇḍika sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya* stand out as discourses appropriate in this regard. Let us go to the former *sutta* (discourse). It notes 'perception' in this way :

"But when your reverences, the eye that is internal is 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. Whatever is material shape in what has thus come to be, it is included in the group of grasping after material shape. Whatever is feeling in what has thus come to be, it is included in the group of grasping after feeling. Whatever is perception in what has thus come to be, it is included in the group of grasping after perception".⁴

Four necessary and sufficient conditions are noted in this passage regarding visual perception. They are as follows :

- i) that the internal visual sense organ—the eye—is intact;
- ii) that the external physical object coming into the per-
cipient's range of vision;

- iii) sensory impingement, and
- iv) an appropriate act of awareness on the part of the percipient.

When all these conditions are met, the result can be referred to as a successful perception or a successful perception-occurrence. 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 not possible logically.

Viewed epistemologically, the above assertions, we contend, favour a kind of causal theory of perception, in whatever form they appear, take as their key notions the existence of the physical object, rather in an unpolished sense. All causal theories of perception in whatever form 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 emphasized by the statement "the internal visual sense organ (the eye) remaining intact is that the eye which is one of the key sense organs in the human body, plays a role in producing an effect, viz., veridical perception or nonveridical perception. 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, from which, however, it does not follow necessarily that the key aim is epistemological as against other-phenomenological, methodological etc.. The Master's key aim is very different which will be made explicit as we go on.

A Causal Theory of Perception

Let me make a brief record of central notions of a causal theory of perception as understood today. This will help the

reader to grasp the nucleus of the point we wish to establish in this paper.

A comprehensive version of causal theory of perception, in a modern sense, must include both the notions of veridical perception and nonveridical perception (false perception). The roles of the sense organs and of causal ancestry together with the material object (physical object) are necessary and sufficient in respect of veridical perception. In non-veridical perception, however, the role of the physical object is inoperative, while those of the sense organs and causal ancestry remain.

With reference to veridical perception, the argument in the *sutta* 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) that there is necessary impingement which is an effect;
- ii) that there is an appropriate act of awareness on the part of the percipient, and
- iii) that the elements which are causally responsible, jointly, for this effect are
 - a) the physical object Y and
 - b) the bio-chemical system of X, the percipient.

Sensory impingement, an appropriate act of awareness on the part of the percipient and the physical object are equally significant for 'veridical perception'. Epistemologically, 'sensory impingement', 'awareness', 'physical object' and 'perception', are the key notions that form the conceptual family. If an epistemological justification of 'perception' is called for, then the *Nikāya* literature must provide relevant data to justify the claim, namely, perceiving 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.

The Dhamma and ' Perception '

In the first instance, the point we made above about the bio-chemical system of X the percipient may be controversial. But, then, the appropriate discourses are emphatic about the necessity of "the existence of an internal sense organ intact" as a pre-condition for perception. The significance of the bio-chemical system of man or X, the percipient, therefore, is inevitable. It is this point that introduces new support for our view, namely, that the perceptual reflections in this discourse offer new support for our view, namely, that the perceptual reflections in this discourse make explicit a kind of causal theory of perception in a somewhat primitive sense. The following passage in "the Discourse of the Honey ball" 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 reasons about obsesses one; what obsesses one is the origin of the number of perceptions and obsessions which assail a man in regard to material shapes cognisable by the eye, past, future or present".⁵ (The issue is extended to other sense organs as ear, nose, tongue and the cutaneous sense organs of the body.

Such words as (i) *eye* (or ear or nose or tongue or body)

and

(ii) *one*

which were noted a little while ago, appear significant to the implied causal theory of perception. Yet, it cannot be entertained that the Buddha was an epistemologist. His exposition of

'perception' and 'perceptual assertions' has a very different pointer, basic deviation from epistemology. Very clearly, it is evident from the end note of the Buddha to his perceptual discussions. The notions of "obsessions" and "assailable attitudes" play a central role in this connection. That is to say, though the above discourses draw forth significant perceptual notions, yet it is unphilosophical to evaluate them as pure perceptual or epistemological ones as found in Western epistemologies. In this regard, methodological or paradigmatic reasons stand out as significant. This point is either neglected or refused to be dealt with by the Buddhist epistemologists who mistakenly elevate the perceptual notions at the expense of the ethical notions which are implicitly contained therein. This is barking up the wrong tree. All perceptual utterances of the Master have a key pointer, namely, preparation of a conceptual base towards introducing the ethics-based *Nibbāṇa* message. This end-point is easily demonstrable by noting and eliciting the Buddha's paradigmatic way of ending all his perceptual discourses. As a few illustrations will highlight the point :

- i) After elucidating the conditions of visual perception in the *Mahāhatthipadopama-sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Master ends on the note : "Do you monks, bear in mind this freedom by the destruction of craving taught in brief by me..."⁶
- ii) In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha deals with 'visual perception' but there is a significant note of ethical norms when he ends it thus : "I will teach you, monks, how suffering arises and how it passes away".⁷
- iii) The point is further elaborated by the Master when he answered a question raised by the *Śākyan* called 'the stick-in-hand' : According to my teaching Sir, in the world with its *devas, māras*, and *brahmas*, with its creation

with recluses and *brahmas*, with *devas* and men, there is no contending with any one in the world; for which reason perceptions do not obsess that brahmin as he fares along not fettered to sense pleasures... Herein, these evil unskilled states are stopped without remainder".⁸

iv) In the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*, Mahākaccana points out that the Master's theme herein is to elicit the utmost importance of cessation of unwholesome states and not a presentation of a philosophy of perception. The point is evident from "...cessation of unwholesome states" ("*akusala dhamma aparisesa nirujjhantī ti*,")⁹

Facts to Ethical-norms

These passages, to a great extent emphasize the conceptual paradigms in the Buddha's *nibbāna*-message. Just at this point what is explicitly evident is the methodology of the Buddha. But, then, what is it in plain words? It is a clear passage from the realm of perceptual facts to that of ethical values. Certainly, this expressive characteristic is markedly seen. The perceptual apparatus which the passages note and elicit appear very good both phenomenologically and ontologically. That is, both from the point of view of experience itself and from what actually exists. From the appearance of human person's suffering (which is an empirical fact) to the path leading to the cessation of suffering (which is an ethical value). The perceptual assertions in the *Dhamma* by exclusive reference to such Western categories as "sensory-impingement", "sense-data" in the sense understood in Contemporary philosophy in the English-speaking world, with special reference to sense-data philosophies.¹⁰

But, then, can both *perceptual fact* and *ethical value* be affirmed in one and the same contention? Is not the whole thought process grounded on a jungle of words unclearly put together?

According to Buddha's paradigms, could one move from perceptual *fact to ethical value* and *vice-versa*? In the Dhammic discourse both categories—ethical value and perceptual fact—are brought together but *not* unclearly put together. That is to say, a totally different arrangement of perceptual fact and ethical value is the case. It is, however, not an explanation of ethical value by way of perceptual fact. Nor is it the case that ethical value is to be subsumed under perceptual fact. Theories of derivation, or logics of explanation, or ideas of subsumption of value under perceptual fact create ostensible problems or philosophical mistakes¹¹ to which there are no genuine solutions. Misunderstanding or misjudging of the method ingrained in the *Dhamma* is that which is responsible for the ostensible issues in some philosophical deliberations about the *Dhamma*. Admittedly, they are philosophical mistakes. These issues or philosophical mistakes¹² disappear when deception is unmasked. The main source of deception, therefore, is the failure to command a clear view of the method of the Buddha.

The method, however, does not make explicit the acceptance of the logical category of perceptual fact and that of value, and further, how both can be brought together. This is not an issue in the Buddha's *Dhamma*. Nor is it a characteristic of the conceptual tools of the Buddha. Simply, the methodology is the acceptance of possibility of unlimited passage from perceptual fact to ethical value. The Master quoting perceptual facts in respect of human life is granted; but the use of them in the whole doctrinal context as well as strategy could create perplexity. In the whole doctrinal context and strategy, the perceptual facts are brought in,

- i) *not* to note the nature of ethical statements;
- ii) *not* to justify ethical value/statement/norm;
- iii) *not* to derive values from perceptual facts; *but*

- iv) to boost one's morale in the direction of the Buddha's ethical virtues.

The methodology of the Master, *ipso facto*, comprises perceptual facts on the one hand and on the other ethical values to provoke or encourage the aspirant, the follower, to follow the norms of the soteriology—oriented ethical Noble eightfold path. No estensible problems are created.¹³

In Western epistemologies, often the case is that the logical category of perceptual fact is acknowledged as significantly different from that of ethical value. It would appear that no knowledge of ethical value be derived from knowledge of perceptual fact. The argument runs that "what is" is distinctly different from "what ought to be" and that statements about "what ought to be" are neither true nor false empirically. The Western categories make this distinction positive and distinct. Accordingly the point of our argument is not that Western philosophical categories are rather irrelevant or unproductive but that such categories are helpful in noting the nature of the Dhamma's notions, ideas, statements, etc. So Western categories have a vital role to play in understanding the nature of the value-laden statements and fact-laden statements in the Dhamma together with their logical role.

This kind of philosophical reflection (basing on the later-Wittgensteinian techniques) entails six key purposes in the philosophy of Buddhism.¹⁴

They are as follows :

- i) enlightening us in respect of a basic conceptual technique firmly established in the Buddha's nibbāna-massage;
- ii) not to guess how a word functions;

- iii) not to ignore the use of a word in the language-game which is its normal home;
- iv) to combat against the fascination which forms of expression exert on us;
- v) not to isolate a notion from the native life to which it belongs in which alone it has meaning;
- vi) not to ignore importance of thoughts that are at peace.

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NOTES

1. *Philosophical Investigations* (L. Wittgenstein, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1953), p. 470.
2. *Ibid.*, para 123.
3. *The Philosophy of Perception* (O. U. P. ed. G. J. Warnock, Oxford, 1967), p. 2.
4. *The Majjhima Nikāya*. Vol. I (P. T. S. London), pp. 236-7.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 324.
7. *The Saṃyutta Nikāya* Vol. II (P. T. S. London), p. 72.
8. *The Majjhima Nikāya* (opcit), p. 147.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 113. Also see : *The Middle Length Saying*. Tras. Vol. I (P. T. S. London), p. 147.
10. Kalansuriya, A. D. P., "On Perception" in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. V, No. 4, 1978, pp. 711-24.
11. *Compare : Philosophical Grammar* (L. Wittgenstein, Oxford, 1974), p. 141. "Or I introduce elements into a game where they have no business at all, as for example, 'silent notes' into the playing of the organ. Then again confusion arises and not a genuine problem".

12. See the following books and articles for ostensible problems or philosophical mistakes :
 - i) *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism* (R. E. A. Johansson, Gurzon Press, Oxford, 1979), pp. 144-5.
 - ii) *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (Cary Zukav, William Morrow, New York, 1979), p. 318.
 - iii) *Philosophy East and West* (Hawaii, 1977, p. 430).
"The notion of Suffering in Early Buddhism Compared with Some Reflections of Early Wittgenstein", by D. J. Kalupahana.
 - iv) *Causality : The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (D. J. Kalupahana, Hawaii, 1975), p. 93, p. 98, p. 107.
13. *Philosophical Grammar* (opcit.) p. 9. ("Philosophy must show that there is no problem where there really is none.")
14. Kalansuriya, A. D. P., *A Philosophical Analysis of Buddhist Notions : The Buddha & Wittgenstein*, Indian Book Centre, Delhi, India, 1987. pp. 126-153 and pp. 217-249.