

Actuality and potentiality in Dignāga's understanding of immediate perception (*nirvikalpaka pratyakṣa*) according to his *Pramāṇasamuccaya* and *Ālambanaparīkṣā*

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Abstract. On the one hand, Dignāga supposes in his *Pramāṇasamuccaya* (part 1) that immediate perceptual experience at every given moment has as its object something that never goes beyond its own actually present content and thus may characterise only itself (*svalakṣaṇa*). In that respect, *svalakṣaṇa* appears as a kind of mere presence, sheer momentary actuality. It cannot undergo any external influence or exercise its own influence on other *svalakṣaṇas*. In other words, it cannot be extended to things other than itself, as is the case of mental constructions. First, I would like to ask whether there is a potentiality in the act of immediate perception according to the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*. On the other hand, in the *Ālambanaparīkṣā*, cognition is an entirely interior process that proceeds, without the help of any external object, from a potentiality (*śakti*) that manifests itself as a sense organ to an internal cognisable form. Second, I would like to dwell on the question concerning whether an immediate perception of *svalakṣaṇas*, free from mental constructions, is still possible in the *Ālambanaparīkṣā*.

The opposition of potential-actual, or potentiality-actuality, was introduced into the Western philosophical lexicon by Aristotle. He used the terms *dunamis* (capacity, force, power) and *energeia* or *entelecheia* (act). In general terms, potency is a capacity, and actuality is realisation/fulfilment/action/presence, etc. In Indian thought, we find a certain number of terms that have more or less the same meaning, first of all the opposition of *avyakta-vyakta* (unmanifested-manifested, or latent and manifested), then several terms for potential without any established counterpart (*pratiyogin*) for actuality, like, for instance, *śakti* (ability, capacity, power, force) and *sāmarthyā* (capacity), and for actualisation or realisation we can use *kriyā*, *vyāpara*, *pravṛtti*, and *karitra*. As for the philosophical developments of this theme, what first comes to mind is the *śāṅkhya*, with its *prakṛti* that evolves from *avyakta* (unmanifested state) to *vyakta* (manifested state). Some reflections of this opposition could be found in many other schools, as, for example, the early Vaiśeṣika list of categories in the *Daśapadārthaśāstra* contained *śakti* and *aśakti*. In almost every system of classical Hindu and Jain philosophy, we may find some suggestions concerning this opposition.

But in this paper I want to dwell on the Buddhist concept of potential-actual, particularly on their understanding of perception. I will take as an example Dignāga's doctrine of immediate perception (*pratyakṣa*).

I start with outlining the context in which the problem of potentiality and actuality may arise. The general Buddhist idea could be formulated as follows. True reality is change (*anityatā*). The Buddha said that all complex things are subject to destruction, so we can assume that things have the potential to undergo destruction. Abhidharmikas have formulated this maxim in a much more radical way: change takes place every moment (*kṣaṇa*). The mainstream Vaibhashikas maintain that every moment there is an appearance (*utpatti, janma*), duration (*sthiti*), degradation (*jara*), and vanishing (*vinaśa*) of phenomena (*dharma*s). Sautrantikas argued that a moment is tantamount to the origination of dharma presupposing the disappearance of the dharma of the previous moment, or some of them held that at every moment there is a disappearance of *dharma*. For them a true reality, that is the reality of the *dharma*s, is only something actually present. What then remains of the potentiality? Does it disappear altogether?

This supposition is absolutely untenable since it runs counter to Buddha's most important discovery, which is the principle of overwhelming causality: all events arise and disappear depending on their causes and conditions (*hetu, pratyaya*). This causality was for Buddhists thinkers a sort of philosophical justification of *karma*, since with its help they tried to explain in what way our past actions determine our present condition, and even more importantly, how our actual behaviour produces an impact on our future. For Buddhists every action made with some intention is loaded with retributive potency that is actualised when this same type of action—skilful or unskilful—is reproduced in the future. Let us suppose that this action is a cognitive act. How does it happen within the frames of momentariness?

The first systematic Buddhist concept of perception was developed by the patriarch of Buddhist epistemological tradition, Dignāga. But Dignāga's understanding of perception is developed in the context of tradition based on some important Abhidharma Buddhist concepts. Among them:

1. The idea formulated in the earliest Buddhist texts of the *Sūtra-piṭaka* that in perception there are three constituting factors: the object of sense (*viśaya*), faculty of sense (*indriya*), and cognitive function appropriate to this organ—perceptual discernment (*viññāna*). In canonical terms, the object is the external basis (*āyatana*) of perceptual discernment and the faculty of sense is the internal basis of perceptual discernment. Each kind of sense faculty has its own kind of object and perceptual discernment (the organ of vision refers only to colour and forms and is supported by a visual awareness, etc.). Each of the six varieties of perceptual discernment

- (visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, gustatory) may serve as a mental organ (*manas*) for the subsequent moment of the mental discernment (*manovijñāna*).
2. The concept of *dharmas* (different interpretations: phenomena, micro-events, factors of becoming, elements, tropes), constituting series to which all individual experience, including cognitive experience, has to be finally reduced.
 3. The concept of momentariness (*kṣaṇikavāda*), according to which a perceptive act is a momentary cognitive event.

There are two main causal explanations of the momentariness in a cognitive process: first, simultaneous causation (*sahabhū*, like lamp and light) based on what we may call the intentional model of cognition (cognition is always directed at an object), so the object of cognition arises simultaneously with the act of cognition. Second, a sequential model of causation: there are causes, the results of which are the later moments in the same category of phenomena (*sabhāga-hetu*), like seed and sprout: in that perspective an object engenders its cognition. Both cases entail difficulties: in the first case, a relationship between cause and effect could not be established with regard to simultaneous events; in the second case, at the moment of cognition the object is already gone. Vaibhaṣikas allow both models: certain causes (*hetu*) and conditions (*pratyaya*) arise prior to their effects, while others arise simultaneously with them. Sautrāntikas believe that the cause must precede its effect. Contrary to Vaibhaṣikas, they do not recognise either past or future *dharmas*; for them only present *dharmas* are real (*dravya*). Does that mean that they do not recognise any potential factors? Let us remember that with a loss of potentiality karmic causality cannot be explained. The potentiality in the Sautrāntika doctrine was represented by the idea of *bīja* (seed) and *vāsanā*, as well as with the doctrine of *santanti-parināma-viśeṣa*—a decisive transformation in the series of *bīja* that generates the effect. Every perceptive act with regard to any object leaves its seed, which is activated in future experience due to the encounter with a similar object. Thus, actual perceptual experience consists in the actualisation of the seed (potential).

These are—presented in a very brief and simplified form—the elements of epistemological themes formulated before Dignāga.

Dignāga's personal contribution is—among other things—the concept of *svalakṣaṇa*. He specially highlights that perceptual experience at every given moment has as its object something that never goes beyond its own actually present content and thus may characterise only itself (the literal meaning of the word *svalakṣaṇa*). It is evident that for Dignāga, contrary to Vasubandhu, *svalakṣaṇa* was not a specific characteristic of dharma according to which it may be classified into one of the 75 categories; it was a dharma itself in its utmost nature that could not be described or defined in words. We have only one clear reference to the nature of *svalakṣaṇa* in the

Pramāṇa-samuccaya: ‘The object of sense is form (*rūpa*), which is to be cognised [simply] as it is and which is inexpressible’ (*PS* 1.5cd).

For this reason, perception for Dignāga can be only a direct, immediate experience without mental constructions (*kaplanāpodha*). Mental constructions belonged to another instrument of valid knowledge—*anumāna* (logical inference)—which was directed towards objects having common features (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*). In that respect, *svalakṣaṇa* appears to be a moment of mere presence, sheer actuality. No factor external to it can introduce itself into it and vice versa; it cannot interfere with other factors. In other words, it cannot be extended to things other than itself, as happens in the case of mental constructions.

We cannot find any positive definition of *pratyakṣa* in the *PS*, but Dignāga tells us what is not *pratyakṣa*—mental projecting or constructing (*kalpanā*). In general, for all Indian philosophers what is most valuable in *pratyakṣa* is its vividness, clearness, and immediate access to reality. All these characteristics, in my opinion, reveal the undeniable impact of the mystic, intuitive experience. It is especially true in Buddhism, where the experience of *bodhi* (awakening) of the Buddha himself was at the centre of the whole doctrine. Even later, when Buddhist philosophers like Vasubandhu, Asanga and Dignāga began to be interested in the study of, say, ordinary perception, the immediacy persisted as its ideal. It was clearly formulated by Dignāga’s greatest commentator, Dharmakīrti, in his *Pramāṇaviniśaya*:

A cognition (*jñāna*) that does not go against reality and that, due to the force of meditation, manifests itself clearly, as in the case of fear etc., is a perception free from mental constructions. (*PV* 28)

Vṛtti: Yogins also, having grasped objects through oral instruction [while studying the Śāstras] and having established consistency (*yukti*) [of this knowledge] through reasoning (*cintāmayā*), proceed with meditation and [when this meditation] attains its culmination (*niṣpatti*), that what appears clearly, like fear, etc. [when an ordinary person is extremely frightened], non-erroneous and free from mental constructions is a perception, an instrument of valid cognition, like the direct experience of noble truth [by the Buddha] described by us in the *Pramāṇavārttika*. (See *PV* 2.147–280)

What then is Dignāga’s *svalakṣaṇa*—an object itself or its image? (1) If it is an object, in that case the content of perception is fully determined by a factor external to the individual karmic series (*santāna*). (2) If the *svalakṣaṇas* are mental reflections (*ābhāsa*) of the object that simply take its form (the *sarūpya* principle), a type of sensory information, the situation remains the same, because in that case these sense-data are still totally determined by their cause—the external object. The first position described above is that of the Vaibhaṣika and its *nirākāravāda* (cognition is without its own form; it simply reflects the object), and the second is that of the Sautrāntika and its *sākāravāda* (cognition has its own form that is congruent with the form of the object).

If our cognitive content is determined only by external objects beyond our individual series, how can we account for the karmic causality that constitutes the internal process? If we accept karmic determination to be the ruling principle of our perceptual experience, there arises a question as to its immediacy: immediacy is, by definition, a relation between something interior (our awareness) and something exterior to it (objects or sensory information).

It is evident that *svalakṣaṇa* is postulated in the *PS* but not sufficiently explained. We can only guess what its ontological commitment may be—whether it is an external object or its mental representation—a type of sensory information—or both. Whatever it may be, it is certainly understood as something unique and new. If we apply the machinery of karmic determination to it, can it preserve its uniqueness and novelty?

Let us turn to Dignāga's famous text *Ālambanaparīkṣa*, where this karmic machinery perpetuating a transformation from potential seeds to actual perceptive experience is exposed in its clearest form. According to this text, cognition is an entirely interior process that proceeds from a potentiality (*śakti*) that manifests itself as an organ of sense to an internal cognisable form (*antarjñeyarūpa*):

The cognition depending on the potentiality called 'eye', etc., as well as on the internal [cognisable] form, arises with an image of the object regardless of an [external] object. Both [internal form and potentiality] are mutually caused and have no beginning in time. (Vṛtti to kar. 8)

Thus, the actual perceptive act arises dependent on the previous perceptual experience that, in its turn, is determined by the faculties and their correlative interior objects. The entire process is supposed to be determined by a person's individual karma, which creates patterns (*vāsanās*) of one's likes and dislikes, embodied cognitive schemas including linguistic competency and categorisations.

One may ask whether an immediate perception of *svalakṣaṇa* free from mental constructions is still possible under such conditions. I think it is not for two reasons: first, there is no *svalakṣaṇa* as some unique, new, and self-defining phenomena. At this level of reality, from the Yogācāra point of view, the dependence of everything on something else—*paratantra*—is put to the fore. The role of dharmas as specifying factors seems to lose its importance at this level. While in classical Abhidharma the notion of dharmas is primarily that of the specifying factors of mental experience, here the accent is made not on their capacity to qualify mental events but on their total relativity and interdependency.

Second, the experience of the immediate presence (*sākṣatkaritva*) of some exterior thing is treated as just an illusion. As Dignāga notes, 'In the absence of an external object, only that interior [form] (*antas*) manifesting [something] that looks like the

exterior [thing] (*bahīrvad*) is an object-condition [of cognition]’ (*vṛtti* to kar. 6: *bahye ‘rīhṣti bahīrvadabhāsanam-antas-sad-eva-ālabhana-pratyaya*).

In Dignāga’s works we therefore find, in fact, two approaches to the problem of potentiality and actuality. The first approach, which may be called phenomenological, is conceived after the model of immediate yogic perception. It consists of the direct access of a non-propositional perception either to an external object or to its mental representation (the ‘Pratyakṣapariccheda’ of *PS* gives no clues to the definite choice between these two possibilities). This approach is associated with the stress on the actual experience of the present moment. The second approach takes account of the karmic process of causation and for this reason it highlights potentiality (*AP*). In the *Viṃśatikāvṛtti* of Vasubandhu, which quite evidently influences the *AP*, there is no place for immediate perception.

16. 16a. The cognition of [what is] before one’s eyes [takes place] as in a dream, etc., even without an (external) object as has been stated before.

16b. When it [takes place, its] object is not seen. How could it be immediate?

When that (*cognition*), called immediate, arises [in the form] ‘this is present before my eyes’, its object is no (longer) seen, and this judgment is made only with the help of mental cognition (*manovijñāna*) because the visual discernment by that moment has stopped. Taking this into account, how can the character of being immediate be postulated, especially with regard to an instantaneous object like form-colour (*rūpa*) or taste, etc. that [at the moment of judging ‘this is present before my eyes’] has already ceased to be?

In this text, Vasubandhu acknowledges only perception of the mental kind (*manovijñāna*) that is not immediate at all, although the opponent’s question was about immediate perception.

It seems to me that Dignāga’s position towards immediate perception, according to the logic of the *AP*, may be the same.

How can we explain this fact? Is there an inconsistency or contradiction between the *AP* and *PS*? I do not think so. I propose to understand these two approaches in terms of *upāya kauśalya*—skilful means. In the *PS*, Dignāga tried to present a doctrine of perception to compete against the doctrines he criticised in the next section, which are mainly realistic. At this *parikalpita* (imagined/empirical) level, he resorts to some common principles of realistic epistemologies. That is why, in my opinion, he did not exclude the existence of external objects (in the form of atoms, which follows from the *PS* 1.4).¹ The *AP*, as it has come down to us, seems to correspond to the

¹ As Hattori translates k. 4cd: ‘[t]here [in the above-cited Abhidharma passages], that [perception], being caused by [the sense-organ through its contact with] many objects [in aggregation], takes the whole (*sāmānya*) as its sphere of operation in respect to its own object (40). Since it [viz., perception] is caused by [the sense-organ through its contact with] many substances [viz., atoms in

paratantra (dependent) level of reality, so these two expositions are simply intended for different purposes—for persons with different levels of spiritual and intellectual background.

References

- AP* — *Ālambanaparīkṣā and Vṛtti by Dignāga*, with the Commentary of Dharmapāla, Restored into Sanskrit from the Tibetan and Chinese Versions and edited with English translations and notes and with copious extracts from Vinītadeva's commentary by Aiyaswami N. Sastri, Adyar, Madras: The Adyar Library, 1942.
- Hattori, Masaaki (trans., annot.) 1968. *Dignāga, On Perception, being the Pratyakṣapariccheda of Dignāga's Pramāṇasamuccaya from the Sanskrit fragments and the Tibetan versions*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- PS* — *Dignāga's Pramāṇasamuccaya, Chapter 1*, A hypothetical reconstruction of the Sanskrit text with the help of the two Tibetan translations on the basis of the hitherto known Sanskrit fragments and the linguistic materials gained from Jinendrabuddhi's *Ṭikā* by Ernst Steinkellner, 2005. Available from: <www.oeaw.ac.at/ias/Mat/dignaga_PS_1.pdf> (accessed 02 December 2011).
- PV* — *Dharmakīrti's Pramāṇaviniścaya, Chapters 1 and 2*, critically edited by Ernst Steinkellner, Beijing, Vienna: China Tibetology Publishing House, Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2007.

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aggregation], it is said, in respect to its sphere of operation, that it takes the whole as its object; but [the sense is] not [that it operates] by conceptually constructing a unity within that which is many and separate (41). [Therefore, the definition that perception is free from conceptual construction is not inconsistent with the statements in the Abhidharma treatises.]' (Hattori 1968, 26–7).