

The Development of the Theory of Perception in Abhidharma and Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda Tradition

Philosophical thought on the nature of perception occupies some of the most significant concerns in the history of philosophy. The role of analysis of perception in Buddhism as found in its early to later phases has always been in one form or the other, anti-realist and anti-essentialist. Before we understand the issues of meaning in Buddhism, it is imperative to understand the different epistemological theories propounded by various Buddhist schools. In the present chapter, I would like to discuss in a comparative manner, the historical development of the notion of perception in both the traditions - early and later schools of Buddhism. The disputant schools of thought, which I shall be encountering in the following pages under Ābhidharmika traditions are Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda (alias Vaibhāṣika), Sautrāntika, and under the Vijñānavāda-Yogācāra tradition Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. My procedure for this would be the following: Firstly, I shall outline the Abhidharma doctrines and controversies on perception and present a lengthy discussion on the question of the historical influence, interrelation, and inheritance among these schools including Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda tradition. Secondly, I will discuss the Dignāga's theory of perception as presented in its most mature form in his last and

greatest work the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, in some detail. Moreover, I will explain the chief tenets of his doctrine like, means and objects of knowledge, definition of *pratyakṣa* and *kalpanā*, different interpretation of *kalpanā*, types of *pratyakṣa*, *pratyakṣabhāsa*, etc. Thirdly, I will highlight the problems/objections at which Dignāga was rigorously criticized, which is the very soul part of this chapter.

Ābhidharmika Tradition

The doctrines elaborated in the Abhidharma literature are too abundant to be treated in a short chapter. Hence, I shall attempt to pick out the most important philosophical trends in the Abhidharma literature and show their relationships to the teachings of early Buddhism, and examine the way in which they contribute to the development of Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda tradition. All three schools examined in this chapter accept the existence of the external reality in some form or other inspite of their divergent epistemological views (as already discussed in the chapter of Realism versus Idealism). Bearing this in mind, the main issues of contention, which I will examine in this context, are the following:

1. The ontological status of the object of cognition.
2. The instrument of perception.
3. The process through which we acquire knowledge of this external reality, i.e., the process of perception.

However, before addressing the issues that I have just posed above, it is first important to understand the meaning and the purpose of Abhidharma, along with the meaning of the word ‘*dharma*’, according to the schools of these traditions.

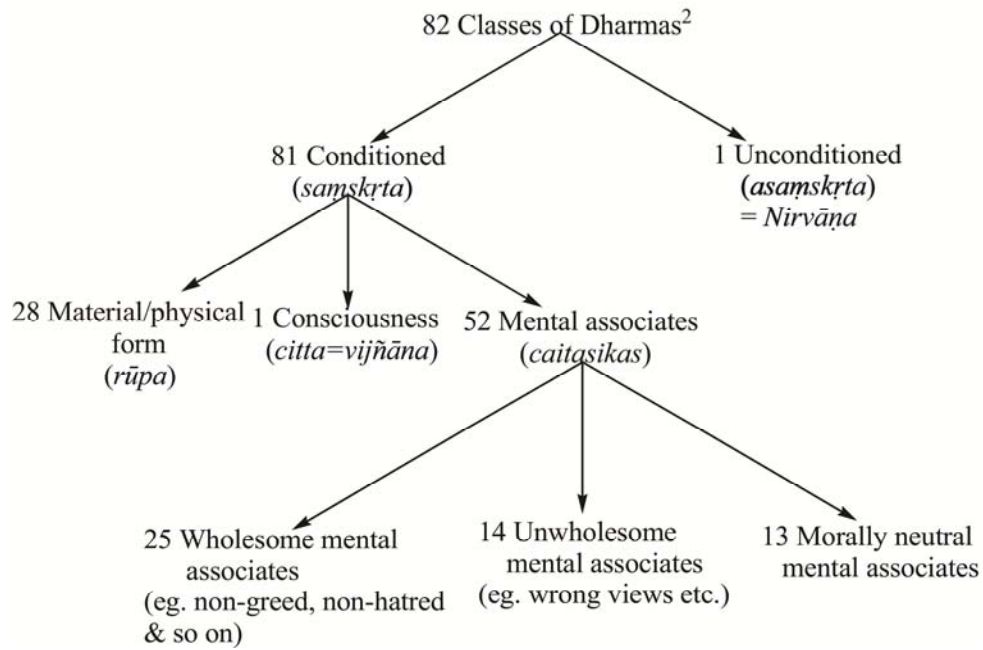
Meaning and Purpose of Abhidharma

The prefix ‘Abhi’ means, ‘further and about’. Therefore, Abhidharma would mean the higher or special *dharma* or the higher discourse on *dharma*. Abhidharma is a truth system to serve as antidote to ignorance that is the root cause of craving and clinging. Moreover, in the Abhidharma philosophy, the word ‘*dharma*’ stands for reality, fact, element or phenomenon as a factor of experience. The *dharmas*, in this philosophy, form the psychophysical building blocks of the world as experienced by us and as such are the constituent elements. The important point to be noted here is that only two Abhidharma canonical collections have survived: The Theravāda Abhidharma in the Pali canon and the Sarvāstivāda (Vaibhāṣika) Abhidharma that survives mainly in Chinese translation.¹

The Theravāda Abhidharma

The Theravāda Abhidharma produced a list of eighty-two classes of *dharma-s*, which can be sketched through the following flowchart.

Theravāda Dharmic list

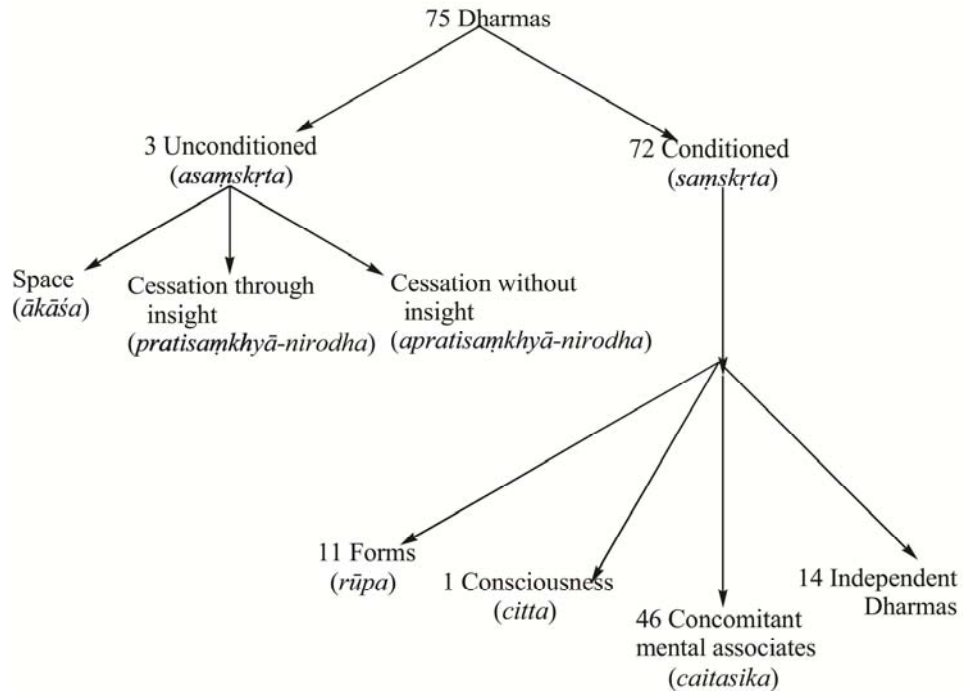


Moreover, the doctrinal dispute arose in the Third council of Buddhists over the question of the existence of *dharma-s* in the three periods – past, present, and future. The traditional Theravādin position on this issue is that only the present *dharmas* exist.³

The Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma

Sarvāstivādins have established seventy-five *dharmas* or elemental factors. They consider these *dharmas* as existing and real. Their name ‘Sarvāsti’ (all *dharmas* exist) indicates their basic philosophical point and shows their strong realistic tendency.⁴

Sarvāstivādin's Dharmic list⁵



Regarding the dispute over the existence of *dharmas*: The Sarvāstivādin (those who held the doctrine that all exist) argued that they exist in all the three time periods - past, present, and future.⁶

The Sautrāntika Tradition

The Sautrāntika, being more critical and refined in their approach than Sarvāstivādin, rejected the latter's theory of existence of *dharmas* in the three times. According to Sautrāntika only the present *dharma* exists, the past does not exist, because it is no more and the future is not real, because it has not yet come into existence. However, the Sautrāntikas are otherwise in agreement with the Sarvāstivāda (alias Vaibhāṣika) classification of

dharmas but with critical abridgement to conform to the teachings in the Sanskrit *āgamas* (*sūtras*) as interpreted by them.

Now, with this much of background of *dharma* in Ābhidharmika tradition, we are now in a better position to address the issues mentioned above.

1. *The ontological status of the cognitive objects:*

In the Abhidharma period, the question of the ontological status of the object of knowledge/cognition became an increasingly important topic of investigation. Now, in order to understand the epistemological theories of the Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika on this particular question of objective reality of the cognitive object, in their proper perspective, we have to take the help from the two valuable texts, namely: *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāsāstra* (MVS) and *Abhidharmanyāyānusārasāstra* (Ny). Out of these two texts, the former cites the teaching of Sarvāstivāda masters and the latter Sautrāntika master Śrīlāta extensively. Several terms are used to denote the object of knowledge, namely, *jñeya* (knowable)⁷, *artha* (object)⁸, *viśaya* (object, object domain or object field), and *ālambana* (cognitive object). According to Sarvāstivāda, the cognitive object is always existent at the absolute level. Whereas contrary to this position, the Sautrāntika maintains that the cognitive object may be either existent or non-existent.⁹ Moreover, as a general reply to such contrary claims, the Saṃghabhadra's text *Abhidharma-nyāyānusārasāstra* (Ny), provides a solution that whatever can serve as a cognitive object producing cognition is an existent, though it may be real in the absolute sense (*paramārtha-satya*) or in the relative sense (*saṃvṛti-satya*)¹⁰, as a mental construction or concept. What is non-existent in the construction necessarily

has as its basis some thing real. This latter basis constitutes the actual object of the perception. An absolute non-existent (*atyantam asada*) has no function whatsoever and hence can never engender a consciousness. Thus, all the cases of illusion, dreams, cognition of unreal, *pudgala*, illusory perception of double-moon, etc., are actually recollection of real entities previously experienced. Moreover, the perception of what we ordinarily regard as a pure abstraction such as non-existence too has a real object.¹¹

2. *The instrument of perception (What sees: Eye or consciousness?)*

The question of what actually constitutes the instrument through which we come to acquire knowledge of the external world is one of the important epistemological issues among the Abhidharma schools. As regard the problem of ‘what really sees?’ (*paśyati*) the text of *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāsāstra* (MVS) begins by enumerating the four views in the form of asking a question:

“What sees - the visual organ (eye in Vaibhāṣika’s view), or visual consciousness (*viññāna* in Theravāda’s view), or the understanding (*prajñā*, conjoined with visual consciousness in Ghoṣaka), or the complex of *citta-caittā* (*sāmagrī* in Dārṣāntika’s view)?”¹²

The author of this text, upholding Vaibhāṣika position, says that visual organ sees but only when it is associated with visual consciousness. Whereas the Vaibhāṣika maintains that the seeing of visible forms is a non-conscious act belonging specifically to the eye. For him, consciousness is consciousness, be it visual or otherwise, its specific nature is that of cognizing, not seeing.¹³ On the other hand, the Theravāda maintains that seeing is possible only by a mental agent, not a material organ; there is no

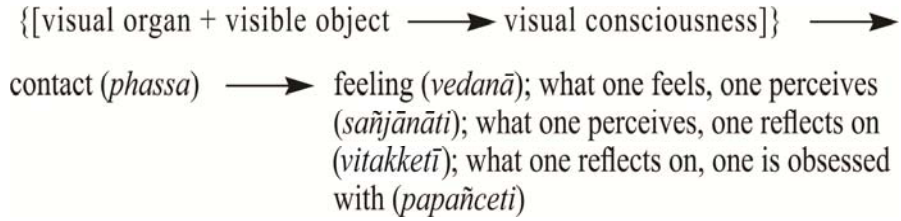
difference in this case between seeing and cognizing. The Theravāda may not equate seeing with cognizing, but also unambiguously concurs that the eye cannot see on account of its not being of a mental nature.¹⁴ The Sautrāntika appears towards the end of this dispute, ridiculing that the whole controversy has been in vain, in as much as there is in reality neither the agent of seeing nor any object qua the seen, but merely a play of *dharma*-s, flashing forth momentarily and in accordance with the principle of conditioned co-arising. However, Vaibhāṣika criticized the Sautrāntikas standpoint by holding that, making unjust criticism they have negated the reasoning of the world and looked down upon what has been established on absolute truth. Further, what they say amounts to a denial of cause and effect, for they do not acknowledge that *dharma*'s have their real individual nature and activity. It is only, when the reality of the individual natures and activities of *dharms* is acknowledge, that we can speak of the difference between cause and effect. Thus, Vaibhāṣika established that it is the organ, not the consciousness, that take their objects i.e., the eye sees, the ear hears, the nose smells, the tongue tastes, the body senses, and consciousness cognizes.¹⁵

3. Ābhidharmika process of perception

The process of perception, which the Upanisadic thinkers explained based on a metaphysical self (*ātman*), received a causal explanation in the hands of the Buddha. For him, this was a problem of prime importance because he realized that all the misery and unhappiness in the world were due to the evils associated with sense perception. The Buddha thus found it is necessary to explain clearly how sense perception takes place. He realized that a proper understanding of the sensory perception would give insight

into the origin of suffering as well as into the way one can attain freedom from suffering. Hence, in the *Samyutta-nīkaya*, the higher life (*brahmacariya*) lived under the Buddha is said to be aimed at understanding the sense-organ, the sense object, and sense contact, i.e., sense perception, because it is sense perception that leads to suffering.¹⁶

The origin of perception from the subject-object relationship is described in diverse ways in many places in the *Nīkayas* and the *Āgamas*. One of the most important and famous statement from the *Majjhimanīkaya*¹⁷, about the process of sense perception, can be sketched through the following flow chart:



This flowchart, I have already sketched in the 3rd chapter on *Pratītyasamutpāda*: Universal Ontological Principle of Reality, while explaining the notion that the principle of causal law (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is operative even in the process of sense perception. The point to be noted is that causal law operates up to the point of feeling or sensation (*vedanā*), immediately after it the process of perception becomes one between subject and object. Now I explain the process of perception. In the first place, depending on sense organ (eye) and visible object, visual consciousness arises. The coming together of these three is called contact (*phassa*). The inevitable result of contact is feeling (*vedanā*), which can be of three types namely: Pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Moreover, according to the

Buddha, feelings, emotions, interests, likes and dislikes play an important role in our perception. However, he was not unaware that feelings can grow into monstrous forms and can be a cause of our confusion and sufferings. To express this idea, the Buddha changes the language he employed to explain the process of perception. Instead of saying that ‘depending upon feeling arises perception’, he says - What one feels, one perceives. The next step is that of reflection (*vitakka*) which can lead the perception in two different ways, either to bondage and suffering or freedom and happiness. If reflection continues to justify the existence of an ego, an independent and self-subsistent entity (*ātman*), it leads to obsession (*papañca*). Moreover, these obsessions are threefold: Craving (*taṇhā*), conceit (*māṇa*), and dogmatic views (*diṭṭhi*) and it is connected with conception.¹⁹ Furthermore, this analysis of perception is of tremendous importance for two reasons: Firstly, it replaces the theory of an eternal and unchanging entity (like the *ātman* of the Brahmanical notion) considered to be the subject, with a causal account of the process. Secondly, while tracing the origin of ego-consciousness to the deliberate activity of the mind, it also accounts for the phenomenon of free will, without which a theory of moral responsibility is untenable.

With this much background of early Buddhist process of sense perception, we are now in a position to discuss in a comparative manner the process of perception within the Ābhidharmika schools. In the 4th chapter on Realism versus Idealism, I have already discussed their theories of perception (direct and indirect realism), with the view that both the Sarvāstivādin (alias Vaibhāṣika) and the Sautrāntika are realists in as much as they accept the existence of external reality apart from consciousness.

Moreover, the former maintains that this is perceived directly, while the latter says that perception is always indirect, though external reality can be confirmed through inference. This dispute between the two partly results from the fact that while both are *kṣaṇikavādins*, holding that dharmas are strictly momentary they differ as to whether the cause-effect relationship can be a simultaneous one or successive one. Therefore, in this chapter, I shall also be outlining this difference of simultaneous or successive causality in sensory perception.

(1) *Simultaneous causality in sensory perception (Sarvāstivādin's and Vaibhāṣika's views):*

According to the advocates of this view, the three factors involved in visual perception (visual organ, visible object, and visual consciousness) come into being simultaneously. In addition, based on the principle of conditioned co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) the process of sense perception function as follows: 'conditioned by the visual faculty and the visual object there arises visual consciousness. If these three factors were not simultaneous, then the visual faculty and visual object produced in the preceding moment ought not be the supporting basis (*āśraya*) and the cognitive object respectively, for the visual consciousness of the succeeding moment; for in that case the latter exists and the former are non-existent. One cannot call an absolute non-existent (*atyantābhāva*) a supporting basis or a cognitive object.²⁰ Thus, from Sarvāstivādin (alias Vaibhāṣika) perspective, the sense faculty serving as the supporting basis (*āśraya*) and the object serving as the object qua condition (*ālambana-pratyaya*), necessarily exist in one and the same moment as the sensory consciousness, otherwise the principle of

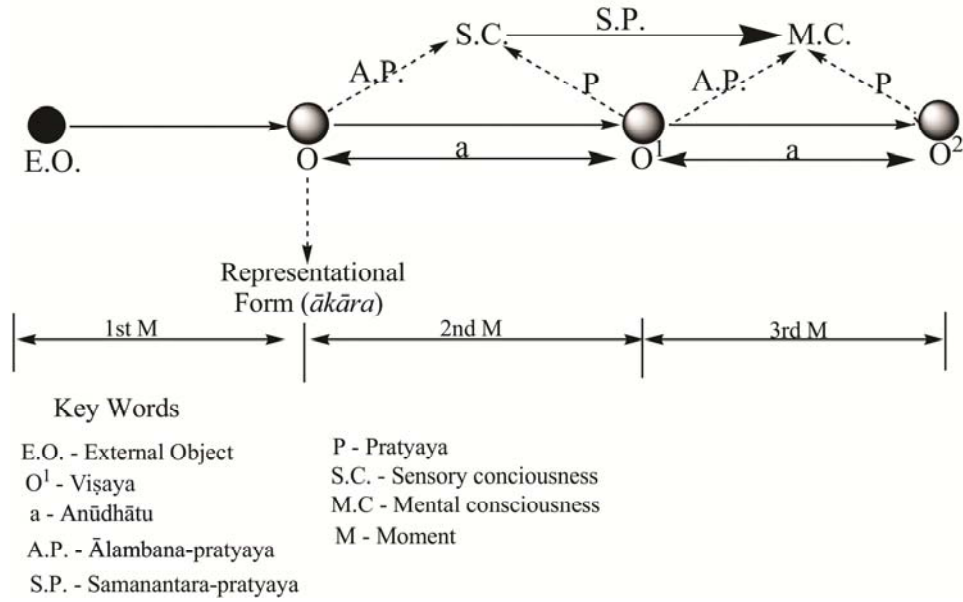
pratītyasamutpāda would be violated. Moreover, because of simultaneous causality, the external object can be directly grasped, inspite of universal law of momentariness. As we have mentioned above that the act of seeing is non-epistemic, not amounting to knowledge, so it is the corresponding visual consciousness that becomes conscious of the object (only in a generic manner). It is this generic, non-discriminating sensory consciousness that constitute *pratyakṣa* (direct perception).

(2) *Successive causality in sensory perception (Sautrāntika's view)*

Sautrāntika raises various objections to the doctrine of simultaneous causality (*sahabhū-hetu*)²¹ and advocates the doctrine of successive causality in the process of perception. Moreover, according to Sautrāntika, the process of perception takes place in three moments instead of a single first moment (as accepted by the Sarvāstivādin and Vaibhāṣikas). Besides, for them, perception is possible even though the cognitive object is non-existence, past, or unreal, in addition the two requisite conditions (*ālambana* and *āśraya*) for perception are still fulfilled. Further, Sautrāntika has made such claims because of their doctrine of *anūdhātu* and the fundamental principle 'a cause necessarily precedes an effect'. Now, in order to understand this doctrine and the principle, we have to explain in detail the Sautrāntika's process of perception.

According to the Sautrāntika, two premises momentariness and the necessary posteriority of effect, when taken together, lead to the logical conclusion that all our knowledge of the external world is necessarily indirect. In the second moment when the sensory consciousness arises as the effect, the cause has become past, therefore is no more existent. This position can be summarized through the following diagram:

Sautrāntika's Process of Perception



In the first moment, the sense organ (eye) sees the external visual object (E.O.) and it is in this moment that O, the representational form (*ākāra*), a unified complex, corresponding to the external object is left in the mental series as external object was passing away. In the second moment, sensory consciousness arises necessarily conditioned by the sensory object (now past), O which is the *ālambana-pratyaya* for the sensory consciousness and O¹ being simultaneous with sensory consciousness, it is its *pratyaya*. Moreover, O the same representation preserved and passed down via the *anūdhātu*²², is the *ālambana-pratyaya* for mental consciousness, which arises in the third moment. Further, sensory consciousness serves as the *samanantara-pratyaya* (immediate cause) for the arising of mental consciousness. O² is likewise passed down

via the *anūdhātu*. Being with mental consciousness, it is its *pratyaya*. O, O¹, and O² are all representational form (*ākāra*) of the same external object and because of *anūdhātu* doctrine; they are preserved and passed down in the series. Moreover, O, O¹ and O² are all mental contents, so whether sensory or mental, the object of perception is always past, non-existent, and unreal. Thus, in the case of sensory perception, the visual object exists in the first moment, conditioning the arising of the visual consciousness of that object (now past) in the second moment. And the arising of mental consciousness in the third moment.

So far, I have discussed the process of perception according to Ābhidharmika tradition. Now, at this juncture the pertinent question that arises is to show the historical influence/inheritance from the Ābhidharmika tradition into Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda tradition. Dignāga followed by Dharmakīrti and others, states that there are only two valid means of perception (*pramāṇa*): Direct perception (*pratyakṣa*), which perceives the specific characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*), and inference (*anumāna*), which perceives the common characteristic (*sāmānya-lakṣaṇa*). This is clearly in part an influence from the Abhidharma tradition, which recognizes only two characteristics of existents, *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānya-lakṣaṇa*. Moreover, in the *Ālambana-parīkṣā*, Dignāga, rejecting all views advocating the external objectivity, concludes that ‘although the external object does not exist, there is the internal *rīpa* which manifests resembling the external object and serves as the *alambana-pratyaya*.²³ It seems therefore evident enough that he is a Yogācārin, though possibly with some Sautrāntika leaning. Nevertheless, in his *Pramāṇa samuccaya-vṛtti*, we can see him at times attempting to align with some fundamental Ābhidharmika doctrines. For

example the definition that *pratyakṣa* is free from conceptual construction is not inconsistent with the Ābhidharmika tenets.²⁴ *Kalpanā* in Dignāga's definition of *pratyakṣa* is essentially similar to the Sarvāstivāda notion of *vikalpa*. It is the process in which the perceived object which is in its intrinsic nature inexpressible, comes to be associated with *nāma, jāti*, etc.²⁵ This is consistent with the Ābhidharmika notion of *abhīrūpaṇa* and *anusamaraṇa-vikalpa* owing to the absence of which the sensory consciousness is said to be *avikalpaka*.

As to Dharmakīrti, his well-known definition of *pratyakṣa* is also a fine-tuning of earlier Sautrāntika doctrines that I have discussed above. Finally, it is worth noting that Dharmakīrti also upholds the Sautrāntika doctrine that perception is possible even though the cognitive object is non-existent, even though the term *anūdhātu* itself is not mentioned. To this extent, therefore, it is appropriate to conclude that, there is an historical inheritance from early phase to the latter phase of Buddhism. Moreover, to make this point, it is imperative to discuss in detail the theories of perception advocated by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti.

Dignāga's theory of perception

Dignāga (circa A.D. 480-540) has been known to scholars of Indian philosophy as the father of medieval logic in India. It is also called Yogācāra-Sautrāntika, the *Pramāṇa* School, the Logico-epistemological school of Buddhism, and sometimes-just Buddhist logician. The schools we have examined up to now have all had their own distinctive metaphysical views. Sautrāntika, for instance, teaches that all things are momentary, while Yogācāra has its claim that only impressions exist. As the alternative

name Yogācāra-Sautrāntika suggests though, the school of Dignāga does not take a stand on at least one important metaphysical issue, whether there are physical objects. After all, Yogacara denies that there are, while Sautrāntika affirms their existence. So someone could be a Yogācāra-Sautrāntika only by refraining from entering into this starts with Dignāga are meant to be compatible with both positions. This must mean that they do not actually answer an important question about what reality is like. Instead, they seem to have thought the dispute over existence of an external world would never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. What Dignāga and his followers did was develop a Buddhist answer to Nyāya epistemology. Their thought was that if this epistemology were acceptable to both Sautrāntika realists and Yogācāra idealists, then it would help people to progress toward liberation regardless of their stance on the metaphysical issue. Therefore, this school does not offer a total package - a complete picture of the world, plus advice about how we should act, based on that picture. Moreover, it says three things: (1) That Yogācāra-Sautrāntika does not teach a distinctive path to *Nirvāṇa*. (2) That any metaphysical teachings it contains are grounded in its epistemological views. (3) That its epistemology is meant to be acceptable to all Buddhists regardless of their views on certain metaphysical issues. So with this in mind, let us look at what they actually have to say. The obvious place to start is with his last and greatest work presented in its most mature form – The *Pramāṇasamuccaya* with its autocommentary (*Vṛtti*), in which he made a systematical exposition of his theories concerning the means of knowledge and dealing with the problem of the limits of knowledge.

The Pramāṇasamuccaya

The text of the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* is written in verse style, and there is a prose commentary by Dignāga himself, namely, the *Pramāṇasamuccayavṛtti*. It consists of six chapters²⁶, and here we are concerned only with the first chapter, which introduces the problem of the means of acquiring new knowledge. The purpose of this thesis is to construe the doctrine of *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, bearing this in mind; the issues/key concepts to be addressed in this context are the following:

1. Means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*)
2. Object of knowledge (*prameya*)
3. Definition of *pratyakṣa*
4. Definition of *kalpanā*
5. Different interpretation of *kalpanā*
6. Types of perception
7. Perceptual error (*pratyakṣābhāsa*)

It goes without saying that there are a number of explanation/divergent opinions with regard to the issues I just posed above, by not only Indian Buddhism but also Indian philosophy in general. However, I will not go into a comparison between these schools. I would like to limit myself to considering the issues within Buddhist *Pramāṇa* School and their major opponent Naiyāyikas.

Means and object of knowledge

It has been mentioned above that Dignāga's point of departure in the first chapter of the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* is to draw a radical distinction between the two kinds of things that can be the object of awareness. He says in the

second verse of the first chapter and its commentary that, the means of validly cognizing an object directly is perception (*pratyakṣa*, immediate) and the means of validly cognizing an object indirectly is inference (*anumāna*, mediate).²⁸ According to Naiyāyikas, there are four means of knowledge, whereas, Dignāga claims the other two are just special cases of inference. However, this is not the most important difference between Nyāya and Dignāga's school over the means of knowledge. Far more important is Dignāga's claim that each means of knowledge cognizes its own distinctive object. He then enumerates two aspects (*lakṣaṇa*) of the object that correspond to the two sources/means, the particular (*svalakṣaṇa*) being the object of perception and the universal (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) the object of inference.²⁹ This differs from the Nyāya view, that one and the same fact may be cognized using different means of knowledge. Suppose, for instance, that from down in the valley I see smoke on the hill, and then infer that there is fire on the hill. Suppose that while I am down below, you are up on the hill, where you see and feel the fire directly. Nyāya would say that you and I are cognizing the same things. The fire that you perceive is the very fire the occurrence of which I infer. The Yogācāra-Sautrāntika disagrees. They claim that your cognition and mine actually have distinct objects. What you perceive is a real particular (*svalakṣaṇa*). What I infer, though, it is not that very fire itself. I cognize something more abstract, something more like fire in general (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*). The particular is ultimately real. The object-in-general is a conceptual fiction. These are Dignāga's claims.³⁰ We should pause here a little to discuss the concepts of *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*.

Svalakṣaṇa and Sāmānyalakṣaṇa

As I have mentioned above that Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda begins the first chapter of the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* with a salutation to the Buddha and distinguishes between *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* by reference to their respective immediate objects (*pratibhāsaviṣaya*), i.e., *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*. *Svalakṣaṇa* is a unique, momentary (*kṣaṇika*), unextended, and unrelated self-characterised entity, which is different from all things.³¹ It is destroyed immediately after securing existence.³² However, it is produced, according to the law of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), by its immediately preceding cause, and it is itself causally efficient (*arthakriyāsāmrthya*)³³ in producing the next *svalakṣaṇa*. A *sāmānya-lakṣaṇa*, however, is an imaginary creation of the mind, based on the observation of the similarity of a class of individual entities. It is verbally expressible. It is not a fictitious entity like the hare's horn, but is the result of constructive imagination (*kalpanā*) based on reality. As each is incompatible with the other, there cannot be anything, which possesses both *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* at the same time. Corresponding to this essential distinction between the two kinds of *prameya*, there is a radical distinction between the two means of cognition (*pramāṇa-vyavastha*). This theory is evidently set up in opposition to the Nyāya view of the coalescence of different means of cognition (*pramāṇa-samplava*).

Now, let us concentrate for the moment on perception (*pratyakṣa*). There are a number of explanations as to the definition and nature of direct perception. However, I will not go in to a comparison of those definitions. I would like to bound myself to considering the problem of the definition

found in the Buddha *Pramāṇa* School (i.e., Dignāga and Dharmakīrti traditions).

Etymological Interpretation of Perception

Before introducing the definition of perception, Dignāga first discuss the etymological meaning of the term *pratyakṣa*. Etymologically the word *pratyakṣa* means a knowledge which arises depending on the senses (*indriya=akṣa*). The question may arise: Why should perception be referred to as *pratyakṣa* (*prati+akṣa*) and not as *prativīṣaya* (literally, belonging to each object), despite the fact that it is dependent on both the sense organ and the object?³⁴ In answer to such a possible question Dignāga argues that *pratyakṣa* is so named, because sense organ is the specific cause (*asādhāraṇakāraṇa*) whereas, object (*rūpa*) is the common cause (*sādhāraṇa*), present in other person as well.³⁵ Dignāga's answer is based on the view of *Abhidharmakośa*, which maintains sense-organ as the indicator of sense-perception on the bases of the following two grounds: (i) The sense should be regarded as the basis (*āśraya*) of cognition (because as the sense is strong or weak, cognition becomes clear or dim). (ii) The sense is the specific cause (*asādhāraṇa-hetu*) of the cognition.³⁶

Dignāga's definition of Pratyakṣa

Dignāga's definition of perception is the most succinct description of perception available anywhere in the Buddhist literature. It is so brief that its interpretation becomes quite varied. The definition runs thus:

“*pratyakṣam kalpanā 'poḍham*”³⁷

That is, the cognition in which there is no conceptual construction (*kalpanā*) is perception (non-conceptual awareness). The more common term used later is *nirvikalpaka*, that is, prior to the association with the

categories of language and conceptual thought. Thus, while the pure particular may be the object (*ālambana*) of perception, it is not the content (*viṣaya*) of perception, since it has in itself no features, which could be grasped by us. At this juncture, the pertinent question which arises is - what is it that is grasped by us in perception? In order to answer this question, we have to understand the process of perception according to Dignāga School, within the context of the Nyāya philosophy, which serves as the dominant account of perception in classical India.³⁸

Nyāya process of perception

To simplify, Nyāya thinkers distinguish two stages in the perceptual process. The first is a bare contact with the object in its sheer givenness. At this stage, we do not understand the nature of the object confronting us but just see, for example, a lump. The articulation of reality through a perceptual judgment that understands the object as it is. We now see the lump as, for example, a jar by categorizing the bare object (the lump) under its proper universal (being a jar). The Nyāya call this stage as determinate (*savikalpaka*) as distinguished from the first stage, the mere sensing of the object, which is called indeterminate (*nirvikalpaka*). The doctrine of determinate perception is an expression of the realism of this school. It is the central element in the Nyāya theory of perception and one of the main points of contention with Buddhist epistemologists. With this much of background, now we are in a better position to explain the Dignāga's process of perception.

Dignāga's process of pratyakṣa

As we have seen that, the tenets of the *Pramāṇa* School are based on the basic theses of Buddhism such as dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and the theory of the momentariness of phenomenal beings (*kṣaṇabhāṅgavāda*). This is true of the definition of valid cognition as well. Direct perception is explained to be a cognition arising immediately after the occurrence of an object, which does not continue at all. It exists only for one moment and in the next moment; the image (*ākāra*) in our cognition is substituted by a very similar, but completely different cognition. For example, when we see a desk, we usually believe that we can continue to perceive the desk as a single entity, admitting the identity of the object for a certain length of time. However, such an assumption is wrong according to the *Pramāṇa* School. They claim that what there really is in our perceptual vision is a sequence of very similar, but completely different moments of time, which are wrongly constructed to be a duration/continuum (*saṃtāna*) of one and the same desk. In reality, the image of the desk manifests itself only in the first moment after one perceives the object. Only the cognition in the first moment is called direct perception and the succeeding similar cognitions in later moments, which belong to conceptual construction, cannot be referred to as direct perception. This idea reveals that the school held a fundamental doubt concerning conceptual cognition in the sense that we cannot grasp the reality of ontological entities through the medium of our conceptual construction. How, then one may ask is conceptual construction explained? Dignāga's answer to this question is found in the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* I 3d and its *Vṛtti*, where he has given the definition of *kalpanā*.

Dignāga's definition of Kalpanā

According to Dignāga's, a thing, which in itself is not intrinsically constructed with any word, becomes expressed by a word when it is associated with a word/name and other factors. *Kalpanā* (conceptual construction) means nothing but this process of associating a name etc. with a thing (*nāmajātyādiyojana kalpanā*). In other words, it is an imposition of our constructed forms upon the 'given'.³⁹ In other words, according to Dignāga, pure perception (sensing) is different from conceptual/conventional perception (perceiving). We sense sense data; we perceive physical objects. In addition, the later is impossible without the former, but it involves more. When we open our eyes, we have certain visual experiences-sense-data, in this we are passive, and cannot help what we see. In addition to this passive intake of sense data, there occurs an activity that we may call interpretation. It is just this process of interpretation, organizing data according to classification provided by experiences, without which process there is no understanding and no use of language, which Dignāga have in mind when he speaks of *kalpanā*, a word that literally means putting into order, arranging, forming or structuring. According to Dignāga, we take the raw data of sensation and attach to them some name, which amounts to assigning them to classes, and when we do so we are no longer dealing just with what is at hand but with a shared something, a general attribute that belongs not only to the things immediately present to the senses but also to the objects remembered from the past or anticipated in the future or in some other way not present to the senses.

Moreover, Dignāga mention five factors/qualifiers/designators (*viśeṣaṇa*) which *kalpanā* associates with a thing (*artha*) in generating verbally expressed conceptual awareness. They are as follows:

1. Arbitrary words (*yadṛcchā-śabda*), a thing is expressed as being distinguished from other things by a name, i.e., proper names such as, *diṭṭha*, etc.
2. Genus-words (*jāti-śabda*), a thing is expressed as being distinguished by a genus, i.e., common nouns such as, cow (*gau*), etc.
3. Quality-words (*guṇa-śabda*), a thing is expressed as being distinguished by a quality, i.e., adjectives such as, white (*sukla*), etc.
4. Action-words (*kriyā-śabda*), a thing is expressed as being distinguished by an action, i.e., terms expressive of agency such as, a cook (*pācaka*), etc.
5. Substance-words (*dravya-śabda*), a thing is expressed as being distinguished by a substance, i.e., terms expressive of ownership such as, a staff-bearer (*daṇḍin*) or a horn-bearer (*viṣāṇin*), etc.⁴⁰

Here, what deserves our notice/attention is the fact that Dignāga's explanation of *kalpanā* is objected to the effect that since Dignāga does not believe *jāti* (universal) to be a real category, he is not entitled to maintain that *kalpanā* is *nāmajātyādiyojanā*.

In order to answer this objection, Dignāga distinguishes two interpretations of these concepts. The first recognizes a correspondence between the term and the thing expressed by the term. This is the realist interpretation.⁴¹ The second interpretation is that these concepts do not stand for anything, and hence are devoid of any meaning (*artha-sūnya-śabda*).

This is the Dignāga's own standpoint. For Dignāga, perception is devoid of such discriminations (*eṣā kalpanā*) only, not of all or any and every form of conception. At this point, Dignāga reiterates his idea that perception is devoid of metaphysical conceptual construction. This is classified by making the distinction, for example, between cognizing 'blue' (*nīlaṃ vijānāti*) and cognizing something 'as blue' (*nīlaṃ iti vijānāti*). The former represents the awareness of a colored object (*artha'rtha-samjñī*) and the later an object possessing the color (*artha dharmasamjñī*). The former is perception that involves the conception of color; the later is metaphysical construction that assumes the color to be a characteristic or property (*lakṣaṇa*) of a reality in Dignāga's list belong to what Dignāga calls the category of *Sāmānya*, universal or generality.⁴³

Further, Śāntarakṣita and his commentator, Kamalaśīla in *Tattvasaṃgraha* and its *pañjikā* respectively, have interpreted Dignāga's notion of construction (*kalpanā*) in a slightly different manner. They say, Dignāga divided the compound *nāmajātyādiyojanā* into two parts (*varga*): *nāmāyojanā* and *jātyādiyojanā*. The first of these parts expresses Dignāga's own thought i.e., adding of names=verbalization, whereas the second expresses the thought of an opponent i.e., associating class concepts=conceptualization. Śāntarakṣita points out that Dignāga mention the second part, just to indicate the non-Buddhist's standpoint; actually, he means to reject it. Moreover, they urge that, first part be, in a sense, also connected with second part. In their opinion *jāti* does not denote a real universal. Rather it stands for a *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*, which is conceptually constructed and is responsible for the production of a general idea. Even

such a *sāmānyalakṣanā* is associated with a thing (*artha*) only through the medium of a name. Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla conclude that the association with a name is the essential feature of Dignāga's definition of *kalpanā*.⁴⁵

Therefore, when Dignāga says that perception caused by the five kinds of sense organs is devoid of conceptual construction, he is claiming that certain forms of conception, i.e., those relating to absolute distinction, are not involved in perception. It is the fixing of the concept (= *nīlam iti vijānāti*) that does not take place in perception because such determination or fixing of the object represents the extended activity of *manas*, namely, the activity of cognizing itself.⁴⁶

Dignāga's classification of perception

Dignāga does not clearly mention anywhere the definite number of the kinds of perception, yet from his discussion of perception in the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* and its *Vṛtti*, it is evident that, he recognized only three kinds of perception, namely: *Indriya-pratyakṣa* (sense perception), *manas-pratyakṣa* (mental perception), and *yogi-pratyakṣa* (perception of mediating yogins). And further *manas-pratyakṣa* is of two types, i.e., awareness of external object such as color eye, and direct self-awareness (*svasaṃvedana/svasaṃvitti*) of such mental faculties as desire, anger, ignorance, pleasure, pain, etc.⁴⁷ Dignāga did not accept *svasaṃvedana* as a fourth type of perception but only subsumes under mental perception (though Dignāga does not make any clear cut distinction between the two). I do not claim, of course, that Dignāga rejected self-cognition/awareness/apprehension altogether. All I mean is that Dignāga conceived self-cognition only as an one aspect of cognition. Dignāga argues

that the self-cognizing character of cognition is not admitted, and then the distinction between the cognition of the object (*viṣayajñāna*) and the cognition of that cognition (*viṣayajñāna-jñāna*) cannot be upheld. For example, cognition of a blue patch has two aspects: (i) The blue aspect and (ii) the cognition aspect. Now, we must all accept that the cognition is itself capable of being cognized. In that case, the self-cognition is to be distinguished from the cognition of the object. Yet, the distinction is inexplicable without recognizing the self-cognizing character of the cognition.⁴⁸ The reason is as follows, self-cognition picks out the cognition-aspect as qualified by the blue-aspect while the cognition-aspect picks out the blue-aspect only. It follows, Dignāga claims, that every cognition has two aspects: (i) The cognition of the object and (ii) the self-cognition of itself. That is to say, when we are aware of something we are also, and always, aware of our awareness of that something.⁴⁹ And it is important to emphasize that there are no two awareness but that there are two aspects of the same awareness. Thus the standard account of Dignāga's view, which starts that Dignāga postulated four kinds of perception, is highly doubtful and mistaken. Moreover, self-cognition is an aspect, which, in as much as the cognition is *pramāṇa*, can be considered as *pramāṇa phala*. And further, Dignāga, perceives this *phala* (*svasaṃvitti*) as the criterion to distinguish perception from non-perception.⁵⁰

Perceptual error/Pseudo perception (pratyakṣābhāsa)

Dignāga's next endeavor is to specify and account for the erroneous perception or *pratyakṣābhāsa*. In *Pramāṇasamuccaya's kārikās* 7cd-8ab,⁵¹

Dignāga mentions several cases of *pratyakṣābhāsa* and intends to differentiate valid perceptual cognition from them. They are as follows:

1. Erroneous cognition (*bhrānti-jñāna*) is not perception, because it conceptually constructs such objects as water out of vapors, etc.
2. Cognition of empirical reality (*saṃvṛtti-saj-jñāna*) is not perception, because it superimposes (*āropa*) on empirical reality something else, that is, conceptually constructs empirical reality as absolute reality.
3. Inference, its result etc., (*anumānānumānikam*) are not true perception, because they are conceptual constructions of previous experience (*purvānubhūta-kalpanā*).

All three types of *pratyakṣābhāsa* explained by Dignāga are produced through conceptual construction. According to Dignāga, whenever the mind is at work conceptualizing there is room for error. However, if no mental processes are at work, there can be no possibility of error. Therefore, according to Dignāga's theory, to use the expression 'perceptual error' is to misuse the term 'perceptual' which is defined in such a way as to preclude error. However, since there are many errors which are not due to *kalpanā*, but are due to defects of sense-organs, conditions of perception and physiological causes, such as, the cognition of double moon, a fiery circle, trees moving backwards and the cognition of fiery columns in water, etc. Therefore, the relevant question, which arises, is that – Why would Dignāga mentions the word '*sataimiram*' at all? Since the several examples of things thought to be but which are not, perception seem to need no repletion.

Literally, *sataimira* means 'with' or 'involving *tīmira*', and *tīmira* at least sometimes is used in Buddhist literature to designate some kind of

eye-disease, perhaps the one which give us double vision so that we see two moons instead of one. However, in the *Vṛtti*, Dignāga does not explain the nature of ‘*sataimira*’ as a kind of *pratyakṣābhāsa*, but only as a qualifier (adjective) of three sorts of *pratyakṣābhāsa*, implying thereby that they are products of ‘*tīmira*’, in the sense of *ajñāna* (lack of proper knowledge).⁵² Thus, it was a principle of Dignāga’s epistemology to explain all incorrect cognitions as being caused by the mind and cognition produced by sense organs is always free from error.⁵³ However, such a denial of sensory illusion was not held consistently through out his writings. As observed by Funayama,⁵⁴ there are two different views concerning the origin of perceptual error in Dignāga’s work: One, his unique epistemology, as found in the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, that every erroneous cognition belongs to conception, including the cognition of a double moon; and two, the rather common place idea that the cognition of a double moon is caused by some kind of sensory defect. Such an idea is found in the *Ālambanaparīkṣāvṛtti*. These two attitudes were not fully reconciled by Dignāga himself.

So far, we have been concentrating on the Dignāga’s theory of perception as presented in the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*. Now, we are in a position to pin point the major problems/objections at which Dignāga was probably strictly criticized, which is the very ‘soul’ part of this chapter.

A critique of the Dignāga School

Dignāga’s philosophical views regarding the theory of perception as presented in the text of *Pramāṇasamuccaya* has been sternly criticized. The issues on which Dignāga was criticized are the following:

1. The attribution of all errors to the mind and no errors whatsoever to the senses leads to the pertinent/crucial problem that, if sense organs never produce false cognitions, then a defective sense organs has to produce either a true cognition or no cognition at all. The trouble with this or any similar interpretation is that it is not very convincing. No matter how well each and every one of the Indian stock examples of errors could be explained away as being due to the mind, the basic conviction that sense organs are sometimes directly responsible for errors could not be uprooted, especially not in the case of defective sense organs.
2. Another problem, which was left open to Dignāga, was how to account for validity of cognition. That is, what would be the criterion to distinguish veridical perception from non-veridical perception (false or apparent perception)? Dignāga perceives the fruit (*phala*) as that which distinguish valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and he utilizes the same criterion to distinguish perception from non-perception.⁵⁵ The fruit is not merely the end product but the continuous working of the process (*savyāpāra-patīta*). Moreover, fruitfulness is also an aspect of self-cognition or the cognition cognizing itself (*svasaṃvitti*). This means that even the concepts formed based on cognition cognizing itself can produce consequence. This relationship is indeed significant, for it is what fuses fact and value. By providing such an explanation, Dignāga is not demonstrating his unfamiliarity with the concept of ‘causal efficiency’ (*artha-kriyā*), as Hattori seems to think,⁵⁶ but is actually

avoiding its formulation in metaphysical terms popular with the Sautrāntika and with Dharmakīrti.

3. Thirdly, having made an absolute distinction between reality as a particular (*svalakṣaṇa*) and concept as a universal (*sāmānyalakṣaṇā*), his problem was to bridge the gap between them again.
4. Lastly, Dignāga's definition of *pratyakṣa* is not sufficient to exclude sensory illusion from the arena of perception and further his definition of *kalpanā* has the defect of being too narrow (*avyāptidoṣa*).

From this long discussion, this detour may lead to the following conclusion that Dignāga made mistakes and in order to make his theory acceptable, Dharmakīrti corrected them. Dharmakīrti had to complete, revised, and modify Dignāga's theory on the following points, I just posed above in the following manner. Firstly, he had to admit that there are erroneous cognitions free from conceptual constructions. Secondly, he had to find a new criterion to guarantee the validity of cognition. This is probably the reason why he introduced the concept of *artha-kriyā* (efficient action), which was unknown to Dignāga. Thirdly, he had to destroy the basic principles of Dignāga, namely, the absolute distinction between perception and inference, according to their respective objects, and the equation of truthfulness with absence of conceptual construction in order to bridge the gap between the perception (real) and conception (unreal). Fourthly, he had to revise the definition of *pratyakṣa* in order to solve the problem of *pratyaksabhasa* by adding the term of non-erroneous

(*abhrāntam*). Lastly, he had to give a wider interpretation of *kalpanā*, to include not only actual verbalization but also the latent capacity of infants and dumb persons to verbalize a cognitive state. Thus, it is evident that Dignāga tries to win the war by losing a battle and Dignāga's work attained its final purpose only in Dharmakīrti. We end this discussion here because a comprehensive discussion of this constitutes the core subject matter of the next chapter.

Notes and References

1. For details, see Krishna (2008), p. 243.
2. The conditioned entities are those that arise in dependence upon causes and conditions and thereby spoken of as being impermanent and insubstantial, whereas the unconditioned entities are self-existent and so do not depend for their origination on causes and conditions, i.e., exist eternally.
3. See *Kathāvatthu*, 1:6.
4. Their philosophical position is summarized as, ‘Self is empty but the *dharmas* exist’. (*pudgala-nairātmya dharma-ātmya*).
5. For details, see Matilal (2008), pp. 184-185.
6. According to Sarvāstivādins, there are two ways of existence: Primary existents (the way *dharmas* exist) and secondary/conceptual existents (the way the composite entities like you, me, table, chairs that are constructed out of *dharmas* exist).
7. It is mainly used by the Buddhist scholiasts and it is synonymous with existent or *dharmas* as factors of existence.
8. The Yogācārin’s uses it to refer to an objective entity whose ontological status they deny. Cf. TVB, 16:
*Katham etad gamyate vinā bāhyenārthena/
Vijñānam evārthākāram utpadyata iti//*
9. For details, see Bhikkhu (2007), p. 46.
10. Ny, 621c-622a.
11. Ny, 624a.
12. MVS, 61c.

idaṃ tu vaktavyam/

cakṣuścakṣurvijñāna-prajñāsāmagrīnaṃ kaḥ paśyati//

13. The Vaibhāṣika insists that it is the eye that sees, because there are two types of functions- seeing and cognizing. It is only the *sabhāga-cakṣus*, visual organ eye that participate in the activity of seeing and the function of cognizing is performed by the visual consciousness. On the other hand, according to Theravāda, it is the visual consciousness that sees.

14. '*cakkhu rūpam na passati acittakattā-visuddhimagga*'.

For details, see Bhikkhu (2007), p.53.

15. Ny, 367b-368a.

16. S. 4.138.

17. *Majjhimanīkaya* 1.111-112

cakkhuñ ca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvijñānaṃ,

tiñṇam saṅgati phassaṃ, phassapaccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedetītam

sañjānati, yaṃ sañjānati taṃ vitakketi, yaṃ vitakketi taṃ

papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tato nidanaṃ purisaṃ

papañcasaññasaṅkha samudācaranti atītānāgatapaccuppannesu

cakkhuvijñeyyesu rūpesu.

18. The term 'contact' is to be understood in its broader sense, as in statements such as 'I am in contact with john', not in the more restricted sense of bare touch. Because the term is used in a more extended or comprehensive sense, the Buddha is able to say all philosophical theories about the world are dependent on contact (*phassa-paccayā*). Contact thus expresses the idea of familiarity. D. 1.44.

19. For details, see Kalupahana (1994), p. 34.
20. Ny, 420c-421a.
21. For details, see Dhammajoti (2007), p.152.
22. The *anūdhātu* is the fact of causal efficacy manifested in each moment of the person's psychophysical series. It is also sometimes called *purva-anūdhātu*, the component 'purva' signifying the fact that these causal efficacies have been transmitted within the serial continuity from previous time. For details, see Dhammajoti (2007), p. 97.
23. For details, see 3rd chapter on *Ālambanaparīkṣā* of the present thesis.
24. See Hattori (1968), p. 26.
25. Ibid., pp. 25-26.
26. For details, see Hayes, Richard.P. (1988), pp. 131-132.
27. See Hattori (1968), p. 24.
28. For details, see Hattori (1968), p. 78, footnotes - 1.12.
29. Ibid., p. 24.
30. For details, see Gupta, Rita. (2006), p. 79.
31. *svamasādhāraṇalakṣaṇam tattvam svalakṣaṇam*. NBT, p. 15. Stcherbatsky refers to a *svalakṣaṇa* as a 'thing-in-itself', in Buddhist logic (1962), Vol.I, p. 183.
32. '*utpādānantarvināśasvabhavo vastunaḥ*'. TSP, Vol.I, p. 179.
33. We would discuss the concept of *arthakriyākāritva* at greater depth in the next chapter on Dharmakīrti improvement upon Dignāga's work.

34. Hattori (1968), pp. 26, 86.
35. For details, see Gupta, Rita. (2006), p. 73.
36. AK, I, 45:
tad-vikāra-vikāritvad āśrayās cakṣur-ādayaḥ ato 'sādhāraṇatvāc ca vijñānaṃ tair niruyate.
37. Hattori (1968), *kārikā*. 3c, p. 25.
38. Here I present a mere sketch of the Nyāya view, leaving out the complexities of without its historical developments. For a more detailed account see, 4th chapter on Realism versus Idealism of the present thesis, where I have explained the process with the help of a diagram.
39. See Hattori (1968), pp. 25, 83-86.
artha keyaṃ kalpanā nāma?
nāmajātyādiyojanā//
40. *yadṛcchāśabdeṣu nāmnā viśiṣṭo 'rtha vcyate dīttha iti. Jātiśabdeṣu jātyā gaur iti, guṇaśabdeṣu guṇena śukla iti, kriyayā pācaka iti, dravyaśabdeṣu dravyeṇa daṇḍi viśāñṭi.*
41. Unfortunately, Massaki Hattori does not mention this interpretation, because he assumes that the correspondence pertains only to the action-words and substance-words, whereas no such distinction is made in Dignāga's explanation. For details, see Hattori (1968), p. 25 (note addition by Hattori in parentheses).
42. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
43. Moreover, there is a comparison between Dignāga's list and Praśastapāda's (the Vaiśeṣika philosopher) list of five qualifiers (*viśeṣaṇa*).

44. The later denote real entities and we can call them predicable with more confidence. For details, see Matilal (2005), p. 14.
45. See TSP, Vol. I, *kārikās*. 1219-21, 1224-25, 1233. Also, see, Franco, Eli. (1984), *JIP* 12, pp. 389-400.
46. Hattori (1968), p. 27.
47. Ibid., *kārikā*. 6ab, p. 27.
48. Ibid., *kārikās*. 8-12, pp. 29-31.
49. See Franco, Eli. (1933), *JIP* 21, PP. 295-299.
50. Hattori (1968), pp. 100-104.
51. Ibid., *kārikās*. 7cd-8ab, p. 95.
*bhrānti-samvrtti-saj-jñānam anumānānumānikam/
smārtābhilāṣikaṃ ceti pratyakṣābhāsam sataimiraṃ//*
52. For details, see Franco, Eli. (1986), pp. 79-97, where he mentioned the Prof. Schmithausen proposed solution: In several places in the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, there are important differences between the *kārikās* and the *Vṛtti*. From that, we can conclude that the *Vṛtti* was not written at the same time as the *kārikās*, and that Dignāga changed his mind in the mean time. Here we have one such case. When Dignāga wrote the *kārikās*, he considered four types of *pratyakṣābhāsa*, but when he came to comment upon them, he saw that the *taimira-jñāna* involves a problem, which he did not know how to solve, and therefore left it without commentary. The *Vṛtti* being his last work, perhaps he did not have the time to make up his mind. (Note also that *taimira* is absent in the *Nyāyamukha*).

53. Hattori, p. 96.

54. See Funayama, Toru. (1999), Ed. Shoryu.Katsura, pp. 73-99.

55. Hattori (1968), p. 28.

56. Ibid., p. 80.